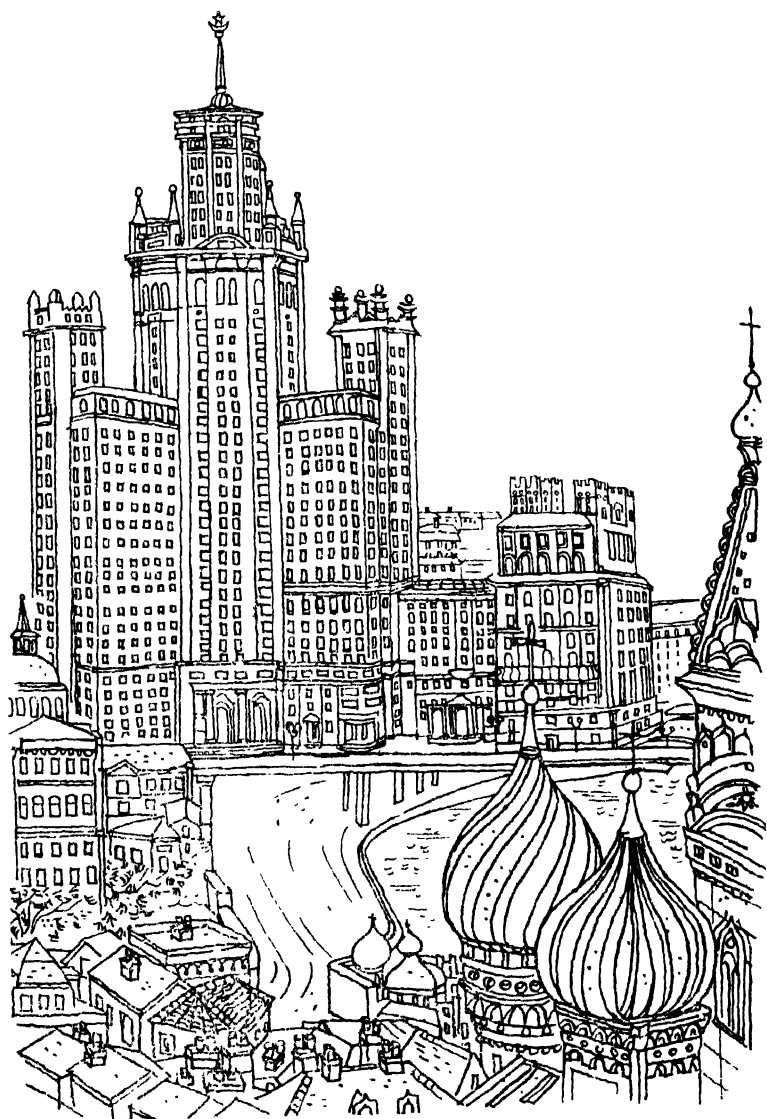


# PENELOPE IN MOSCOW

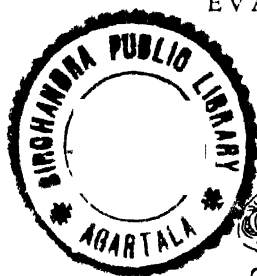


# *Penelope in Moscow*

\*

PENELOPE SASSOON

ILLUSTRATIONS BY  
EVA NAJMAN



WEIDENFELD and NICOLSON  
7 CORK STREET, LONDON, W.1

*First published in 1913*

*Printed in Great Britain by  
Co-operative Wholesale Society Limited*



# Contents

| CHAPTER |   | PAGE |
|---------|---|------|
|         | <i>Author's Note</i> . . . . .  | VIII |
| I.      | <i>I obtain my Soviet visa and set foot on Soviet soil. The dullness of Brest-Litovsk. By train to Moscow: with tea, vodka, and a loud speaker</i> . . . . .            | 9    |
| II.     | <i>Beauty and ugliness in Moscow. The dingy Hotel Metropole. The strange ways of Soviet hairdressers, chiropodists—and censors</i> . . . . .                            | 15   |
| III.    | <i>Shopping: I encounter masses of food. Ready-made clothes are in inferior tastes. The monotony of Moscow's shops. Hooligans. I grow fond of the "Metro"</i> . . . . . | 20   |
| IV.     | <i>The Moscow Ballet lives up to its reputation. Soviet citizens dare to talk to us—when drunk. Easter and May Day celebrations</i> . . . . .                           | 26   |
| V.      | <i>Arts and entertainments in Moscow. I see boring films, skilled and witty dancing, political circuses, and acres of bad paintings</i> . . . . .                       | 36   |
| VI.     | <i>Summer in the park. Moscow mothers and their quiet, obedient children. Food problems and minor irritations</i>   | 43   |
| VII.    | <i>Leningrad—a touch of the West, and of half-destroyed beauty. I go to Moscow football matches. Midsummer in dacha-land. More National Days and receptions</i> . .     | 47   |

## CONTENTS

|       |  |         |     |
|-------|--|---------|-----|
| VIII. | <i>I am shown some impressive Moscow schools and children's institutions, and am left wondering about the effectiveness of Soviet education</i>  | .. .. . | 56  |
| IX.   | <i>Serge visits a collective farm. I lose my sense of humour. We are actually invited to a private Soviet apartment—just once</i>  | .. .. . | 62  |
| X.    | <i>We go South. A pub-crawl on the Odessa Riviera. Strange interlude in forbidden Kiev. We return regretfully to Moscow</i>  | .. .. . | 67  |
| XI.   | <i>Brief encounters: Elena and Vera. Mid-Victorian manners in Moscow</i>   | .. .. . | 77  |
| XII.  | <i>Stalin's birthday. I view the improbable birthday presents. I attend a women's chess championship, and go skating</i>   | .. .. . | 83  |
| XIII. | <i>Food becomes cheaper. Stalin is re-elected. We dine with Sonia. Domestic worries of my friends</i>  | .. .. . | 88  |
| XIV.  | <i>I go to the Soviet theatre and to a Soviet "Western" movie. Spring comes. My second May Day in Moscow—less novel than the first</i>   | .. .. . | 95  |
| XV.   | <i>I note an improvement in Soviet summer clothes. Sonia and I go bathing. We actually succeed in leaving for our summer holiday in the South</i>  | .. .. . | 102 |
| XVI.  | <i>Georgian food, wine and music. We walk through the cobbled streets of Tiflis in moonlight—and are thrilled. We wander among churches and spires dating back to the 6th century, and worry "Nannie," our Intourist guide</i> | .. .. . | 113 |

## CONTENTS

|        |   |     |
|--------|---|-----|
| XVII.  | <i>More holiday atmosphere, magnificent drives, old churches and frescoes. We picnic, we bath, we are arrested—and are sad to leave Tiflis. A glimpse of the lush, beautiful Black Sea Riviera, and then—the return to the depressing Moscow winter</i> | 124 |
| XVIII. | <i>A brief holiday in the North: the old churches and streets of Vladimir. We meet a sober, intelligent engineer, and some gaily drunken farmers</i>  | 139 |
| IXX.   | <i>The Iron Curtain bears down more heavily. Sonia and Elena disappear from my life. I hear Shostakhovitch play. I fall ill, am ordered a luscious diet, and prepare to leave Moscow with few regrets</i>   | 147 |
| XX.    | <i>Last days in Leningrad. The young woman who talked about Sartre and Pirasso—who was she? My farewell to the USSR</i>   | 155 |



## Chapter 1

*I obtain my Soviet visa and set foot on Soviet soil. The dullness of Brest-Litovsk. By train to Moscow: with tea, vodka, and a loud speaker.*

"It's a call for you from Belgrade." I snatched the receiver eagerly from my mother. "Hallo! Yes . . . Serge . . . What? I can't hear—spell it. Moscow! You are transferred to Moscow? . . . Goodbye, darling." I sat back in my armchair and poured myself a strong gin and lime. It was January, 1949.

I left for Paris several days later, and there I attacked the visa problem. First I went to the Soviet Embassy where I was told very politely that it would be doubtful if I could get a visa in less than three or four months, but I might try the Consulate. I did, with much better results. I walked past a long queue of rather worried-looking people and asked, in my most important manner, for Monsieur X. It worked! I was shown into Monsieur X's office immediately and he rose to greet me. He was a young man with candid blue eyes, and spoke rather charming French. "What can I do for you?" "I'd like a visa for the Soviet Union." "Yes, yes, but for what reason?" "My husband has just been appointed Agence France-Presse correspondent to Moscow." "In that case it will be perfectly easy for you to get your visa. All you have to do is to fill in this form and let me have a copy of your autobiography which you must have typed in triplicate in Russian." "But I don't know any Russian." "That doesn't matter at all, there are many Soviet citizens in Paris, and any one of them would be delighted to help you."

I thought it pointless to protest that I didn't know any Soviet citizens in Paris, but I did enquire what sort of biography would be needed. "Just a short account of what you have been

doing—who your parents are—where you were born—what work you have done and so on.” “ Oh!!! ” The subject was dismissed. “ And how will you be travelling to Moscow? ” then asked Monsieur X by way of friendly conversation. “ We shall be going by train from Paris. ” “ What a pity . . . it is so much more interesting to do the journey by air. ” We then had a little chat about aeroplanes, which were evidently a passion with Monsieur X. He promised to wire my application for a visa to Moscow, and assured me I would receive it in ten days’ time. I felt much cheered, and went downstairs to fill in the long form which he had indicated to me.

The following six weeks were spent in hectic preparations for departure. We were not particularly likely to find a flat in Moscow, and would in any case start off in the Metropole Hotel.

I received my visa about three weeks after my visit to the Soviet Consulate. We asked various of our friends who had recently been in Moscow what we ought to take with us. The answers were completely contradictory, and ranged from “ Take absolutely everything because you will never be able to afford anything there even if you find what you want ” to “ Above all, don’t encumber yourself with too much as you’ll only regret it and anyway you will be able to get everything you need on the spot. ” We chose the middle way, concentrating mainly on thick serviceable winter clothing. All that my husband and I regretted later was that we had not given sufficient attention to evening wear. In Moscow a dinner jacket will do for private parties but, unless a man appears in white tie and tails at the many “ National Day ” receptions which are a big feature in the Moscow social round, he runs the grave risk of being mistaken for a poor relation—or rather, politically speaking, a “ satellite ”.

On March 28th, we waved farewell to a depressed group of friends and relations on the station platform. It seemed horribly final. The next evening we had two hours in Prague, and the following night we spent at a hotel in Warsaw.

## CHAPTER ONE

On the morning of April 1st we arrived at the Soviet frontier garrison town of Brest-Litovsk. One of the first sights was that of women working on the railway line, a sight which could have been shocking to a Western eye, only their tough sturdy build prevented me from feeling any bourgeois sentiments of pity. With woollen scarves wrapped round their heads, heavy saxe-blue cotton-padded coats wound round their bodies, woollen stockings just visible at the knees and feet shod with high felt boots ("valenki"), this female brigade could have competed with any women I had ever seen in strength or bulk—but hardly in beauty. Their faces, like their bodies, were on a large scale—infininitely wide and very rosy.

We gingerly stepped off the train on to Soviet territory. We were met by an *Intourist* representative who showed us to the *Intourist* office.\* The waiting-room was provided with a very comfortable sofa, which was just as well, as we had to make it our headquarters for the next twenty-one hours. It appeared that some sort of technical hitch had been found in our visas and Moscow had to be telephoned before this could be set right. This hardly sounded encouraging.

We ate, and then took turns to sleep on the waiting-room sofa until teatime arrived. Moscow still had not ventured a sign, but we were told we could visit the town if we liked: we had already somehow taken it for granted that we would not be allowed to do this! Moreover, we were neither followed nor accompanied. Brest-Litovsk on that wintry April afternoon gave me an impression of very drab drabness. It must have been a long time since it had seen any new paint. The women's clothes looked warm enough, but that was about all one could say. There was nothing very exciting in the shop windows, so we wandered into the Church. The average age of the worshippers was pretty high, and all of them manifested a really devout fervour. The Church door was besieged by beggars waiting for alms.

---

\* The *Intourist* Agency in the USSR is the State Travel Bureau to which all foreign visitors must apply.

During our stroll we passed a group of children who evidently found our Western clothes as strange as we found the Russians', for they burst into uncontrollable laughter as we went by and when we returned the same way a few minutes later, we saw that the group had swelled, as it might have done in England if a Punch and Judy show suddenly turned up in a small town. It was nice to give so much pleasure to the young, but I wondered what made us look so funny. We had bought our fur hats in Belgrade and they were rather different from the Russian ones worn by men, which are provided with earflaps lined with fur and tied on top of the cap, fur side up, when not pulled down over the ears, fur side inwards. All the women we had seen wore white woollen shawls tied round their heads, so that my hat might perhaps have looked humorous to the children.

My fur coat was far from new but I had not noticed any Brest-Litovsk citizen wearing a fur coat. Then, of course, my skirt was several inches longer than any "native" skirt, and I was wearing woollen ankle socks and shoes—not "valenki." Serge is of Russian origin, so that I wondered what could be wrong with *his* appearance. His heavy navy-blue overcoat struck me as only too ordinary and his trousers were splashed with mud. Ah yes, I had it: perhaps there was something too self-assured about his walk, and something altogether too rakish about the angle of his hat. Perhaps he looked more Russian than I did but, all the same, he looked distinctly un-Soviet. Soviet men wore their caps straight and, if not in military uniform, were pretty poorly clad—that is in Brest-Litovsk. Most of them wore short cotton padded jackets instead of overcoats, and by now, at the end of the winter, the jackets were no longer clean.

We dined in a restaurant off copious helpings of cabbage soup and hashed meat cutlets, washed down with vodka. The bread was brown. The waitress was young, plump and "jolly", with the regulation skirt length—reaching to just above her knees. She coyly passed us a little note which read, "Do you speak English?" Serge engaged her in conversation.



## CHAPTER ONE

This had to be in Russian, which he knows fluently, for the contents of the note had exhausted the waitress's knowledge of English. She wanted to know all about education and fashions in England. She had learnt English at school but had forgotten it since. She was rather horrified to learn that I had not studied Russian at school.

Our train was due to leave for Moscow at 3-30 a.m. Hardly more than half an hour before this, we were informed at the *Intourist* Office, where we were once more trying to rest on the sofa, that our visas had been proclaimed in order by the capital and we would be visited immediately by the Customs. I always regard Customs officials everywhere as my natural enemies—unnatural men who have been trained to unpack but not how to repack. These, however, were both quick and careful. They were solely interested in written or printed material and were kind enough not to insist on opening my hatbox, which was tied together with string and could not possibly have been fastened again in time for us to catch the Moscow Express.

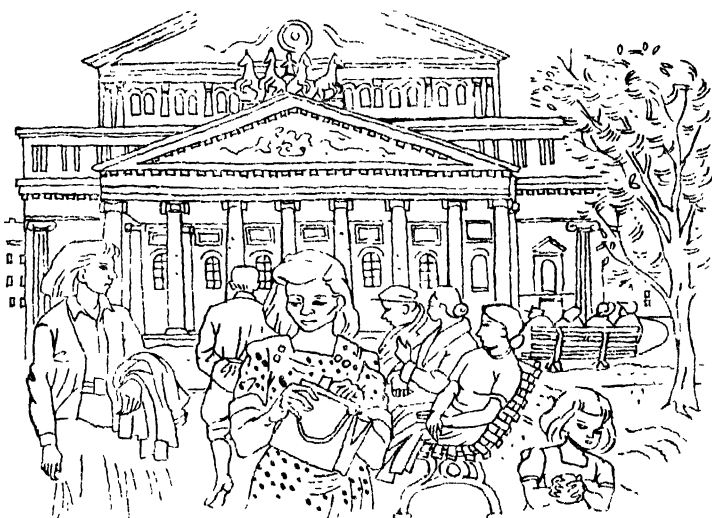
"Why, we have a pre-revolutionary carriage!" exclaimed Serge as he gave a final push to the seventh suitcase. "The notices are written with the old Russian letters, and oh! look at this!" I lowered my eyes to where Serge was pointing and was able to read in French, "*Sous le lavabo se trouve un vase.*" The chamber pot had evidently been abolished after the revolution, for only the notice remained. We were travelling "International". Our compartment was a glorified equivalent of a second-class sleeper on the Continent. There were two beds, but instead of being one close on top of the other, they were arranged in the form of a 'T' so that the top bunk only crossed the bottom one at its foot. Also the compartment was wider than any I had been in before, as the gauge of the Russian railways is broader than ours. Presently a smiling guard came in and offered us tea. We were cold and therefore delighted. We drank it slowly from the glass, holding on to the handle of the metal stand.

## PENELOPE IN MOSCOW

The journey took two nights and one and a half days. The scenery was bleak and almost treeless, with frequent patches of snow to be seen. Every now and again we passed clumps of wooden bungalows, the famous Russian "Izbas" and quite often we saw single solitary ones. The weather was grey and cloudy, and rain or sleet fell in fits and starts. The train ambled along slowly, and we were entertained by Russian popular songs and Soviet news and pep talks from 8 a.m. till 1 a.m. The loudspeaker was just next to our compartment. There were others all over the train. Meals, like the radio, were continuous and *à la carte*. The atmosphere in the dining car was very gay. The car was crowded with smart young Army officers and drink flowed freely: Serge told me that football formed the general topic of conversation.

At lunch-time of April 3rd we arrived in Moscow. My excitement was clouded by my fears for our registered luggage which seemed to have disappeared. "Nothing ever fails to turn up here—no need to worry," Serge's press assistant, who had met us at the station, said soothingly. "Come along and have some vodka to celebrate your arrival." We piled ourselves and our hand luggage into a large, sumptuous grey taxi, and drove to the Metropole Hotel, stopping *en route* for refreshment at a nice small cafe advertised as "Third Class". And three days later our registered luggage arrived, too.





## Chapter 2

*Beauty and ugliness in Moscow. The dingy Hotel Metropole. The strange ways of Soviet hairdressers, chiropodists—and censors.*

I HAD been in Moscow for at least a week before I felt able to co-ordinate my first impressions of that great ancient and modern capital with its population of between six and seven million people. The exact figure is regarded as a State secret. We also found that neither a map nor a telephone directory of the city was in existence.

The Metropole Hotel is very centrally situated, almost next door to the Bolshoi Theatre, an impressive white building of the early nineteenth century, and just round the corner from the famous Red Square. This in its turn is dominated by the fantastic, voluptuously-curving, multi-coloured Cathedral of St. Basil, now a museum. I always felt disappointed never to

## PENELOPE IN MOSCOW

see a beautiful fairy princess lean out from one of the cupolas. Lenin's dark-red marble mausoleum blends pleasantly with the mellow red brick of the Kremlin walls. The Kremlin itself is a wonderful harmony of green, white, yellow and gold. So far so good, I thought on my first glimpse. But Moscow of to-day is in fact a city of striking contrasts. Lovely old churches are scattered throughout the older and modern sections. In the centre of the town there are wide modern streets bordered by narrow, ill-kept pavements, there are imposing new ministries and blocks of flats, unfinished skyscrapers, crumbling pre-revolutionary mansions, well-kept museum buildings and, almost side by side with these, tiny, ill-smelling cobbled alleys and courtyards, picturesque timber cottages and depressing wooden shacks. Throughout all this tangle is woven a series of small and large public gardens and squares, and everywhere one is conscious of trees. Much beauty and much ugliness can be found in Moscow. And the Metropole Hotel, our home for 21 months, belonged definitely to the latter category.

The exterior is impressively hideous: tall and grey with vulgar attempts at decoration. Inside, there is a large, dimly-lit hall, nearly always crowded by peoples of many nations. Here delegations from all over the Soviet Union and satellite countries and Communist groups and delegations from the outside world gather and disperse and wait patiently for *Intourist* guides (some of the groups are apt to wear strange national costumes). There is a constant draught and no cheer—an atmosphere of something between a railway station and a typical commercial travellers' hotel with an Oriental flavour. Cigarettes and "papirossi"—short cigarettes attached to long cardboard holders and preferred by the Russians—are sold at one end of the hall, next to the lift, which often works but sometimes doesn't. Luckily we were independent of its vagaries, for our rooms were on the first floor—second floor according to the Russian calculation. The corridors were long and dreary, carpeted in dull dark-red. At regular intervals an elderly maid would be sitting in a chair, half asleep or just

## CHAPTER TWO

looking into space. The presence of these maids, we were assured, was a precaution against theft.

As soon as I saw our bed-sitting room, I felt depressed. The walls had recently been painted blue. The furniture was upholstered to match the curtains, in a dim patterned material which recalled to my mind unsavoury English boarding house decoration. There was one picture on the walls—a bad coloured reproduction of Bavarian scenery. The twin beds were curtained off from the rest of the room. The cupboard was too small. “Will we really have to make our lives in this room for the next three years?” I asked dejectedly as I took stock of the surroundings for the first time. “You were highly fortunate to get a room here at all,” briskly remarked a journalist who was officiating at the ceremony of our installation. “It is extremely difficult to find hotel rooms and you will soon get used to it.”

I looked out of the window. The courtyard and roofs I saw did not encourage me. However, the central heating was effective and the water hot. We had a private bathroom, too small to use as a kitchen as well. The maids looked nice and “comfortable” in their three-quarter length dark dresses and white caps and aprons, and they hovered around smiling their welcome. I did not think that either they or the hotel itself were the least bit modern. Everything seemed more Tolstoyan than Marxian. And, since I did not speak Russian, for some time my personal relations with the hotel maids consisted of battles of gestures.

I soon became a regular customer of the Metropole hair-dressing establishment. For a long time this was an extremely painful procedure, for the dryers could not be regulated, the steel curlers which were used to set my hair grew hotter and hotter, and I never did succeed in explaining to the girl that I preferred hairpins to curlers. So I suffered in silence, sitting miserably at some distance from the dryer, holding a towel against my head which I twisted monotonously from side to side for two hours or so, until my hair was passed as dry. But

towards the middle of my stay, all this was changed, for I discovered to my joy that the Metropole hairdressers had acquired quite a civilised set of German dryers. Torture was to become merely a distant memory. I asked the pretty blonde girl attending to me: "Do you speak English, French or German?" "I love the Russian language," came the indignant reply. Later she asked me for a cigarette. "American or Russian?" I inquired. "I much prefer American," she said firmly.

I also used to patronise the Metropole chiropodist. I liked the "foot lady", who was elderly and kindly and really good at her work. She would sometimes leave me for half an hour with my feet in a bowl of warm water, which was always quite cold by the time she returned. The first time this happened I expressed slight annoyance at having been kept waiting so long without warning. "But I had to have my lunch," the good chiropodist replied, surprised that I should be surprised at such a normal occurrence at 4 o'clock in the afternoon. After that I took things more philosophically and took a book with me. I was always put in a cubicle from which I could hear very well what went on in the cubicle next door. One day it was an English lesson for the hairdressing staff. I heard the Russian teacher of English make her pupils repeat: "Good morning Mrs. Brown, Smith or Knight. What do you want? You want me to make your hair? Do you like curls or locks?"

My husband's office was just opposite our bedroom. It was a dim room looking on to another courtyard and completely dependent on artificial light at all hours of the day and seasons of the year. He soon got into the swing of his work although life for a foreign news-agency correspondent in Moscow made greater demands on patience than on the usual qualities required of a journalist. A messenger carried his cables to the Telegraph Office where they had to await the censor's approval before being despatched. This censor was an invisible being, officially nothing but a myth (like the Soviet view of the English war effort) as officially the Soviets would never admit to the

## CHAPTER TWO

existence of a censor. The hours of work were also most uneven as the Tass Agency often telephoned to announce the release of some important item of news any time between 1 o'clock and 4 o'clock a.m. Still, we soon got used to these minor worries in this strange life.



### Chapter 3

*Shopping: I encounter masses of food. Ready-made clothes are in inferior tastes. The monotony of Moscow's shops. Hooligans. I grow fond of the "Metro".*

WHAT first struck me about the Moscow shops was the large number of big food stores and also the huge quantity of foodstuffs obtainable. I had recently been in Belgrade where, at that time, the shop windows were mostly conspicuous for the scarcity of goods displayed in them—which perhaps largely accounted for my surprise.

The larger food store in Russia is called a *gastronom* and the windows are adorned with plastic models of cows and cheeses, hams and eggs, all rather dusty. The art of attractive window dressing is painfully attempted, with some slight success as far as confectionery is concerned. Sweets and chocolates are done up in pretty, colourful wrappings, and if





### CHAPTER THREE

you want to give anyone a huge box of chocolates with a picture of the Kremlin or another favourite view of Moscow on it, you will find no difficulty—as long as you don't mind how much you pay. Chocolates in the USSR are as plentiful as they are expensive. Kindly Russian parents can be seen buying chocolate bars or individual sweets for their children, but such delicacies compare with lobster or fresh salmon in England and are not at all a part of everyday Moscow life.

Meat and sausages of all sorts cram the *gastronom* counters, and tinned crab and varied kinds of tinned fish, tongue, cooked meats, etc., swarm pyramidically up from the shelves. Fresh ham and smoked tongue, smoked salmon and other smoked and fresh fish beckon to you from other counters. Caviare—red, pressed and fresh—invites you to buy. There are various sorts of cheeses, local Soviet brands and imitations of Roquefort, Gruyère or Dutch cheese. Butter and margarine vary as to price and quality. The bottled vegetables and bottled and dried fruits look quite tempting. Only the prices are high.

The cost of living was very high indeed in April, particularly for foreigners owing to the unfavourable exchange. We soon discovered the existence of good Soviet wines from Georgia, the Crimea, Moldavia, the Ukraine, Azerbaijan, etc., for which we had to pay far more than for the best French wines which we were allowed to import on a quota basis. Unfortunately a journalist's quota was not very large and a journalist's wife got no quota for intoxicating drinks at all. So we went on investigating the possibilities of Soviet liquor. The Russians, we noticed, mainly drank beer and vodka. The former was good and the latter very expensive, but that did not interfere with its popularity.

Before going to the Soviet Union I had a clear mental picture in my mind that I would find acres of drabness. Although I had under-estimated the bursting plenty that greeted me, I had not over-estimated the sameness of everything. Each *gastronom* is arranged in exactly the same way as every other *gastronom*. There

## PENELOPE IN MOSCOW

are "super" food stores and ordinary food stores, but the difference is slight. In a "super" store you might get better caviare and cheese, or it might be the only one to stock smoked eels during the season, but the general appearance and the goods obtainable are depressingly similar. Nor do prices vary from one shop to another.

Food stores predominate, but there are also shops for every other sort of commodity. The *Mostorg* is Moscow's Selfridges' or Army and Navy Stores. It is a pretty poor version of our English departmental stores, but in the eyes of the Russians it is the best big store imaginable. Long queues line up patiently outside its doors well before it opens at eleven o'clock in the morning, and until it closes at eight its counters are all but unapproachable. At least I hardly ever dared attempt to approach them, but given the physical strength and endurance of the average Russian shopper, I daresay I might have found it quite possible. I caught glimpses of materials covered with hideous patterns, shoes I was not tempted to try on, ribbons and reels of silk which looked attractive and colourful, toys which looked rather fascinating, cooking utensils which seemed solid, men's ties my husband never asked me to buy him, embroidered tablecloths we could not afford, and so on.

I preferred the smaller shops. I expect the quality of the goods was the same as at the *Mostorg*, but the better things showed up to greater advantage when not surrounded by quantities of shoddier goods. Toys, embroidered blouses and men's shirts and embroidered table linen stood out well. In the central market, however, the prices are not controlled and the same item can be cheaper at one stall than at another. I found this out to my cost. I don't think I have ever seen so much meat before and I wished all British housewives could have been with me. Part of the market is in the open air and part covered over. The crowds and queues were terrific and I frequently heard the prices asked disputed by large, purposeful women buyers. Yoghourt (*kefir*) and sour and fresh cream (*smetana* and

### CHAPTER THREE

*slivki*) were being ladled in a continuous stream into suitable receptacles provided by the customers.

The "commission" shops were always exciting to wander through. They stock valuables which people have sold to them, at official prices. They are the nearest Soviet approach to our antique shops. With enough money it was possible to buy lovely old jewellery and silver and enamel work. I used to look longingly at the garnets, but I was told that they were much cheaper and just as good in Austria. Finally, I bought a set of very attractive modern enamelled vodka "cups". They were lined with metal and cost thirty roubles each. The antique ones cost three hundred roubles each (the rouble stood officially at eleven to the pound).

My other purchases consisted of "palekh" boxes. These are hand-painted cigarette boxes. The theme is generally taken from a popular fairy tale and the work is done by a group of artisans who used to paint ikons in Tsarist days.

The state-owned "commission shops" were less irritatingly similar to each other than the other shops. However, the usual run of shoppers everywhere never seemed to vary at all. These were mainly women, and nearly all made to look like shapeless, well-wrapped-up bundles of dull coloured cloth: that was my main impression. The wrapping was in no way attractive and there were always untidy ends. I was struck by the ugliness of the Russian crowds. Most people seemed to me to have thick snub noses, large mouths, broad faces and ugly big hands. Thoroughly unaesthetic, I decided, yet at the same time they looked friendly and pleasant.

I had met a number of Russian *émigrés* in London, Paris and elsewhere, and I was amazed to find how much they differed in appearance from the general run of Soviet men and women in civilian dress who thronged the Moscow streets and shops. It was a question of features rather than of clothes. Of course, the clothing was quite different from what I had been accustomed to see in other countries. The women mainly wore shawls, padded cotton or inferior cloth overcoats, woollen stockings,

sloppy shoes, with or without goloshes, or just "valenki", and the men had their furry caps with earflaps, their padded coats, beneath which could be seen weary-looking lengths of trouser tucked into the sturdy "valenki". However, I felt I had never met such disparity of features and build in one nation as I observed between *émigré* Russians I had met abroad and the citizens of the USSR. A Soviet collective farmer and his wife coming up to Moscow for a day's marketing could not possibly be mistaken for anything else, however they dressed. So many Russians I saw seemed to be crudely moulded—almost like unfinished sculptures. They had vigour, health and personality; but they looked as if the sculptor had left off chiselling before completing and fining down his figures.

At first, the ready-made clothes and materials displayed in the shop windows shocked my Western eye by their utter tastelessness. That was how I felt in early 1919. Everything is comparative as well as relative and I was to see many changes.

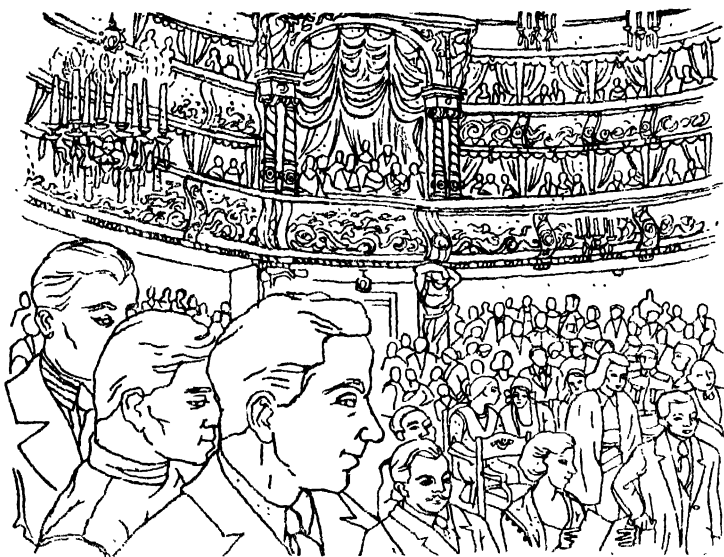
One also does not have to be long in Moscow before realising exactly what the Russian word "hooligan" (pronounced "khooligan") means. It is the name given to gangs of boys, aged from about 8 to 15, who stick together in order to pick people's pockets or to steal from their bags or to perpetrate other little pleasantries. And "khooligans" can run! Sometimes in shops when I opened my bag to take out some notes, revealing other notes while I fumbled for the right amount, a kindly neighbour in the queue would whisper that I must take care; I ought not to take so much money about with me because of the "khooligans." I always listened to this advice attentively and clasped my bag tighter, but I still continued to shop with more roubles on me than I was likely to need.

One day I learnt my lesson. I was doing a round of the "commission" shops in search of a birthday present. We were just leaving the shop where I had bought a set of pretty silver coffee spoons when we found ourselves barricaded in the narrow entrance by three or four small boys. As we tried to work

### CHAPTER THREE

ourselves free and push out into the street, my engagement book fell out of my open bag. There was an immediate commotion. Between us, we grabbed hold of one of the boys, but he got away again, and I saw him flash across the street and run for all he was worth, clutching in one hand what looked suspiciously like rouble notes. Luckily he had only had time to take a few small ones. From then on I was more careful.

As far as transport was concerned, we soon found that we could obtain large and small taxis from the rank just at the side of our hotel at almost any time. The big taxis, which were called *Zis* and strangely resembled Packards, were twice as dear as the small taxis called *Pobieda* (Victory) which resembled Fords. Besides taxis there were excellent bus, trolley bus and tram services and, above all, the "Metro", the pride of all Soviet citizens. It compensated for its lack of sufficient stations by its cleanliness and gorgeous decoration. Each station is a work of art in itself. One may or may not appreciate that particular type of art, but it is hard not to admire the grandiose scale on which it has been executed. The simpler of the decorations are impressive. I liked less the "strength-through-joy" type of statues at the station named Revolution Square. That was our local station, and against my better judgment I found myself getting rather fond of it after a time. The Moscow Tube system was originally inspired and designed by a British engineer, and the moving staircases are just like those of the London Underground.



## Chapter 4

*The Moscow Ballet lives up to its reputation. Soviet citizens dare to talk to us—when drunk. Easter and May Day celebrations.*

IT may at first sight seem strange that the Fatherland of Socialism should boast of first, second and third class restaurants, but Soviet citizens are well used to this.

The Metropole Hotel restaurant is of the first variety, in name but not in quality. It is dim and covered by a glass roof hideously gorgeous in a Victorian way with a fountain in the middle of the floor. My first dinner there started at midnight and ended two hours later. We went there because we wanted a quick meal! The menu card was printed in Russian, French, English and German, and seemed to represent the last word in capitalist luxury. Then came anti-climax. Half an hour or so after our arrival an elderly waiter suddenly noticed us and

## CHAPTER FOUR

decided to take our order. When my chicken soup with noodles was brought I was most astonished to find that it was absolutely devoid of any taste of chicken despite the two or three ungainly bits hacked from that fowl which were floating in it. The grilled sturgeon was good, but the chocolate *soufflé* was another disappointment. The intervals between the courses gave us ample time to smoke too many "papirossi". But since I prefer Oriental to Virginian tobacco, I found them rather agreeable.

None of the people around us were well dressed. Few of the women's frocks reached below their knees and some of the men were tieless and most of them had either very short hair or completely shaven heads. They did not appear to have taken much care in shaving their chins. An orchestra played Sovietised jazz and quite a few couples danced—on the whole, rather well. We ordered Turkish coffee. The grounds were large and floated on the surface, but even so, it was more drinkable than the non-Turkish coffee I had been having for breakfast in the morning. The Russians, like the English, prefer tea.

I soon got used to our Moscow mealtimes and lunch at 2 p.m. or 3 p.m. and dinner between 10 p.m. and 1 a.m. quickly seemed as normal as lunch at 1 p.m. and dinner at 8 p.m. I was seldom dressed before 10-0 or 10-30 in the morning. Whatever time we went into any restaurant, people were always eating—not necessarily the same meal.

Very soon my life began to assume the shape it was to have during my stay in Moscow. There was a continuous round of engagements—largely consisting of Embassy parties and National Day receptions. Never before had I got caught up in such a whirl of luncheon parties, cocktail parties and dinner parties, followed by morning hangovers and drinks again at midday.

But there were also the theatres and the restaurants which were unlike anything outside Russia.

My first ballet made a tremendous impression on me. We

## PENELOPE IN MOSCOW

saw the famous Ulanova dance in " Bakhchisaraisky Fountain ". I was transported to another world. Here was beauty and grace. Here was no crudeness but only complete harmony of movement. This was utterly satisfying. Though I knew little of ballet technique, I realised that never before had I seen a *corps de ballet* keep such perfect time and move in such perfect unison. Each individual dancer was both a separate entity and an integral part of the whole *corps*. None looked worried about what they should do with their hands as I had noticed so often among youthful English *corps de ballet* dancers. The miming was as good as the dancing. We witnessed a real battle scene, a real death scene, real rage, and real sorrow on the stage. My emotions were touched and I fell in love with Ulanova. She floated and she melted, she whirled and she soared. The end of the performance left me thrilled and breathless. The music was by Asafiev who was no more than a mediocre Soviet composer, but that did not matter.

Indeed, to go to the ballet in Moscow was, I found, quite as wonderful an experience as had been claimed for it. Throughout my stay I went as often as I could. For a popular ballet featuring Ulanova or Lepishinskaya, or for " Swan Lake " (favourite ballet among Russian audiences) it was always difficult to get seats by any method. As a last resort one could go to the opera house just before the beginning of the show and buy more expensive " black market " seats from private persons disposing of tickets. I don't think this was strictly legal, but it was done.

The evening after my first ballet I dined at a gay restaurant, with its inevitable orchestra. The Russians enjoy music with their food. A gramophone replaces the orchestra in the lower-class eating places. At the next table to ours sat a Soviet family party with an " up from the provinces for a spree " look about them and I was amused to catch expressions of embarrassment on the two young people's faces as their fathers—a couple of stout and beaming colonels—drank vodka after vodka " bottoms up ". Finally one of them rose unsteadily to his feet



## CHAPTER FOUR

and performed a solo dance which was duly applauded by all the other diners. The colonels' wives entered thoroughly into the party spirit—only youth was shocked.

Many of our friends had cars in Moscow. We were never able to afford this luxury. Soviet chauffeurs demanded exorbitant wages. Even if we had succeeded either in passing the Russian driving test or in using an international licence without having its validity questioned (as a number of foreigners did) we could hardly have done without a chauffeur owing to the scarcity of garages, and the total absence of any service garages. Not many Russians own private cars, but there are a few privileged ones.

I heard the following anecdote. A young Soviet couple had just got married and were in a dilemma. The husband was proud of his new car, but had no garage. If he left the car outside at nights it would certainly be stolen. If he slept in the car he could not sleep with his wife, who had a small flat which it would be dangerous to leave unoccupied at a time when more than one room to a family was considered an enviable luxury. What could the young people do? The husband decided to keep, and sleep in, his car, and the wife to stick to her flat.

Two weeks after my arrival in Moscow I had my first Russian lesson. The *Burobin* agency\* provided me with a pleasant young French speaking teacher at 50 roubles an hour (between £4 and £5 at the official rate<sup>1</sup>). Sonia—let me call her by this name—was an intelligent young woman, by profession a school teacher. She had a slender figure and lovely wavy light brown hair. She used to tell me that she used to be mistaken for a Georgian, since Russians tended to be squat, with broad faces. She was pure Russian, however, despite her delicately moulded features. It was agreed that I should have two lessons a week. My grammar book soon taught me to say sentences like: "The train is going along; the wheels make a

\* This is the twin of *Intourist* and serves as a link between foreigners and higher authorities for supplying apartments, hiring out furniture, getting servants and generally ministering to the foreigners' material needs.

## PENELOPE IN MOSCOW

noise " or " The enemy retreated while our soldiers advanced " but it was some time before I could say to the maid: " Please clean the room " or " Please take the laundry—I have made out a list."

One morning I decided to send some flowers to a friend. I rang up a Frenchwoman who had been long enough in Moscow to know the ropes and we went shopping together. Never had I seen such crowds, not even in Oxford Street just before Christmas. A lot of people were buying Easter fare, for the Muscovites now celebrate both the Orthodox and the Communist holidays and feast days—unofficially, anyway! The sweet departments were full of Easter eggs done up in silver paper and there was a rush for Russian Easter cakes, eaten with cottage cheese. The florist's was rather empty. The only flowers available were pots containing either one hydrangea or one cineraria, or else huge baskets of mixed hydrangeas, cinerarias and stocks, all done up with vast bows of white or pink paper—hardly suitable for anything less than a wedding or a funeral. We were told curtly that flowers were not delivered.

One evening during my first month in Moscow, we set out with a friend to dine at a quite attractive second class restaurant. The food was good, and even the tablecloth was clean—something usually found only in first class restaurants.

Two men and a girl sat at the table next to ours. After a time one of the men came over and asked me to dance, for the gramophone was playing non-stop dance music. He first addressed Serge: " I would like to ask you a question about your country, do you mind? " " Go ahead," answered Serge. " I would like to know whether it is considered polite in France to ask a lady to dance before you have been introduced to her . . . of course after asking the husband's permission." Assent was given. My partner and I discovered that we knew about the same number of words in German, so, with the aid of my elementary Russian phrases, we started a sort of conversation.

My partner told me that he was an engineer. When he got

## CHAPTER FOUR

back to his table afterwards, having first returned me to ours, we were amused to notice a little scene of jealousy between him and his girl who was fair, pretty, and wore a pale blue wool dress reaching to her knees. Serge asked her to dance and discovered that she was Ukrainian. I danced several more times with the young man. He asked me if the French liked the Russians to which I replied that those who came to Russia certainly did. I then asked if he liked the French. "I like you." I hastily attempted to direct the conversation into less personal channels. "Russian is a very pretty language," I hazarded, in Russian. "Oh no," he replied, "French is pretty; it is the language of the salons." The third time we danced together I was informed in German that I had beautiful eyes, and as I found no suitable reply, my partner asked me if my husband would not be worried about my dancing with him. "Oh no," I said automatically.

This was evidently quite the wrong answer, for he went up to Serge when we had finished the dance and asked him if he would mind leaving me behind! Once that got straightened out, we joined forces and all had a very pleasant conversation. The engineer told Serge that his father was attending the Paris Peace Congress. Serge asked for his name, probably a bit too eagerly, for our friend hesitated a second and then gave what must have been a false name. Serge knew exactly who had gone to the Peace Congress from the USSR, and the engineer's father's name was not on the list. He must suddenly have remembered to whom he was talking and decided on prudence. Of course we never saw him or the girl or the other man again.

Another evening we visited the famous Georgian restaurant "Aragvi", which specialises in meat cooked on the spit. Georgians appear to be more animated than Russians. The Aragvi orchestra played some Georgian tunes with a plaintive, Oriental appeal—markedly different from the stereotyped gaiety of Russian popular songs. The Aragvi head waiter had a lordly manner, a flowered waistcoat and a wig of black hair trimmed to a long bob which seemed to derive from Tsarist days.

## PENELOPE IN MOSCOW

We ordered red wine with our supper, a popular Georgian wine called Tsinandali which is dry, pleasant, but a trifle heavy.

We found ourselves relaxing in what seemed a strangely non-Communist atmosphere of excellent food and polite service. A friend of ours came over to our table and introduced the Russian girl he was with. These "mixed" friendships were still just possible, although rare, in early 1919. The girl spoke English. "Do tell me," she asked me anxiously, "do the English still care for dogs? We Russians simply love them and I am terribly unhappy as I have just lost my Dalmatian." She then got up to dance with our friend. I noticed that she was good looking and very slim and was wearing a dress of a reasonable length. I was told afterwards that she came from an "intellectual" family and that her father was a professor.

At another restaurant, the "Kiev", also specialising in regional cooking, we were with friends who spoke German and one of the Russians at the next table to ours soon discovered this and entered into a lively and loud conversation about the "easiness" of Austrian girls. He had been stationed in Austria where he appeared to have had a good time. His wife, an ugly woman with glasses, scowled menacingly at her husband as he warmed up to the subject of Austrian feminine charms which he illustrated with frank and picturesque gestures. We drank a toast to friendship with this pro-Austrian enthusiast, and then shortly after we saw him being hustled protectingly out of the restaurant by his wife and a couple of waiters.

The other man who had been at their table remained alone. He did not speak German and he had not shaved. He blew me a positive volley of kisses and said all sorts of things I did not understand. Nothing daunted, he opened his coat and showed me a fat wad of rouble notes—I really could not make out why. He then asked us all to go home with him but had already forgotten his invitation by the time a tactful waiter tapped him on the shoulder and said: "Your taxi is here, comrade."

We were just asking for the bill, having finished eating, when a very drunk bald man reeled up to our table and begged

## CHAPTER FOUR

Serge to let me dance with him—just once. Not wishing to be impolite, I agreed to dance. The orchestra was playing a waltz but my partner was so excited that he could not wait to get me on to the dance floor and started whirling me round into all the tables. A waiter called us sternly but kindly to order. "I have lived five years in Austria," breathed Mr. Bald-Head ecstatically. "Strauss-Waltzer—jawohl!—yoo-hoo!" With a Russian imitation of a yodel he swung me round at such speed that we almost fell over. "I've lived four years in Austria," he whispered confidentially as the music stopped, much to my relief. He escorted me back to our table, tugged at Serge's lapel and murmured softly: "I have lived three years in Austria, you know."

Before we could continue the interesting conversation, a smartly dressed young man with a bow tie came to fetch our second Austria-enthusiast away. He bowed politely to Serge and me, apologising for his friend's "elation". The latter did not at all want to leave us, but the younger man was firm—and sober—so he allowed himself to be led off, protesting mildly. Residence in Austria seems to have had a startling effect on at least a few Soviet citizens!

One thing that particularly struck me about the Russians was their extreme tolerance towards drunkenness—always providing that there was no fighting, in which case the police appeared and removed the offender with lightning speed. Generally, however, Russian drunks seemed peaceful enough, and commanded every possible aid and sympathy from waitresses, barmaids and the police themselves. I remember once seeing a policeman on point duty, puffing away at his cigarette (this is allowed in the USSR), splitting his sides with laughter at the antics of two very drunk drunks trying to help each other across a very wide square late at night.

Russians, when inebriated, could sometimes rather take one aback. We were out with some French friends one evening and as we were leaving the restaurant, a man reeled up to us and asked if we were German. Before we had time to deny this

accusation, he raised a clenched fist and said in German: "Long live the Red Front." When Serge indignantly denied that he was German, adding that he did not even know the language, the man said he should know it as France, Germany and all those Western countries were one and the same thing! We didn't know whether the man said this because drunk, or whether he really thought so. And we still don't know.

All this may sound appallingly trivial. In no other country would one note and remember such chance conversations with alcoholics in restaurants. But in Soviet Russia they formed part of the few contacts a foreigner could have with ordinary citizens—and they were treasured as such!

One night towards the end of April we were on our way to find a restaurant which would give us dinner at 1 a.m. We encountered a long procession of huge tanks, thundering through the quiet, dimly lit streets, emitting an ugly stench of dark grey smoke. This was a rehearsal for the May Day parade. The censor did not pass Serge's innocent little story about this, for apparently it would not do for foreigners to imagine that the Russians ever needed to rehearse anything, just as it would not do for foreigners to imagine that a queue can be seen in Moscow. Correspondents must beware of mentioning either queues or military rehearsals as such habits are considered—officially—to belong only to capitalist countries.

The night before the Orthodox Easter, we went to midnight Mass. The crowds stretched out a long way in front of the cathedral, forming a huge conglomeration of believers who had no hope of getting inside the church, which was already quite packed. We were able to get in because there was a special section reserved for foreign diplomats and correspondents, among whom I noticed a beautiful girl—she was the daughter of the famous Anna Pauker. The service was impressive and the music really lovely. The Patriarch himself officiated—a tall figure with shoulder-length grey hair, and blue eyes,

## CHAPTER FOUR

splendidly clad in rich robes. The solemn priestly procession went round the outside of the cathedral in accordance with the Orthodox tradition: the crowds appeared extremely moved.

In 1949 the great Soviet holiday of May 1st fell on a Sunday. The celebrations lasted three days. We attended the Parade in the Red Square where places are reserved for foreign journalists and their wives next to the diplomats' tribune. We had to show our papers to a succession of uniformed officials on the way to our seats. One has to stand up to watch; but, when exhausted, one can relax by leaning against the stone barrier. At 10-0 sharp Generalissimo Stalin and the members of the Politburo marched up to take their places on the top of the Lenin Mausoleum. Stalin's appearance was on this occasion greeted with moderate clapping. The National Anthem was played simultaneously with the gun salute. Then the "show" started with two Marshals, resplendent with medals, galloping up and down.

The Square was decorated with red banners displaying suitable slogans. In the military parade several thousand soldiers marched past, followed by sailors, police, lorries, tanks and guns. Aircraft flew overhead. Then came the sports representatives, clapping their hands above their heads and crying: "Long live Stalin!" Finally, from 11-15 a.m. until 4 p.m., the civilian procession had its turn. Men, women and children carried banners, flags or artificial flowers—rather more bright than beautiful—and all seemed happy and excited. It was the first sunny day I had experienced in Moscow.

In the evening we went to look at the illuminations in the Red Square, rather on austerity lines but not disagreeable. The lights were white and the banners red. An extra colour would have cheapened the effect. There were huge crowds milling around. I was reminded of an English Bank Holiday crowd. Most of the people were in family groups. They were quiet, orderly and seemed gay and very good tempered. We dined after midnight at the hotel restaurant which was crammed with merry and none too sober revellers.

## Chapter 5

*Arts and entertainments in Moscow. I see boring films, skilled and witty dancing, political circuses, and acres of bad paintings.*

ONE evening Serge took me to see the Soviet film on the Battle of Stalingrad. The cinema was small, packed and stuffy and no smoking was allowed. I did not find the film very good, except for some of the battle scenes. Otherwise we were shown endless close-ups of an actor impersonating Stalin, a Stalin who remained calm in face of all disasters and originated effective strategic plans without any apparent consultation. Churchill was shown refusing adamantly to open a second front in 1942. "Ha, ha!" chuckled Stalin when Churchill had left the room. "He just wants to establish British influence in the Balkans." This remark was addressed to Molotov. Roosevelt was shown as quite a decent fellow—but then he is dead. The actor who took his part bore no physical resemblance to the original. Hitler looked like Charlie Chaplin and drew a few laughs from the audience.

Next we saw *The Fall of Berlin*, shown at a stuffy little cinema next door to our hotel. An excellent chief actor was playing the part of a worker-hero, Alyosha, who, as a reward for beating the production record at his steel factory, was presented with the Order of Lenin and sent by plane to Moscow to visit Stalin. The scene showing Alyosha's welcome inside the Kremlin appeared to delight the audience.

We saw the big, burly factory worker ushered into the Kremlin garden where Stalin was pottering about, planting a little tree and listening to the birds. Alyosha was so overcome with nervousness that he fell over a flower bed and then



## CHAPTER FIVE

addressed Stalin as Vissarion Iossifovich which was a shocking mistake, as the correct way should have been Iossif (Joseph) Vissarionovich (son of Vissarion). Stalin was all smiles and gentleness and led Alyosha into lunch. The other guests were all members of the Politburo. Alyosha, to hide his embarrassment, never stopped talking for one minute all through lunch. He delighted everyone with his lyrical description of how steel was manufactured in his factory. Stalin and the others listened in appreciative silence. Alyosha found great difficulty afterwards in taking his leave correctly. He was seen to shake Stalin's hand twice, and then he started to walk backwards towards the door! At last he got out the right way round and wiped his perspiring forehead.

Alyosha was in love with a girl called Natasha. She had just given him her first kiss in a cornfield when Nazi aircraft zoomed overhead and dropped incendiary bombs which set the field alight. When Alyosha and Natasha finally got back to their village, they found a scene of appalling ruin and devastation and nothing left intact.

That started the long war part of the film. Some of the battle scenes were well done, but one was also shown constant glimpses of Stalin in the Kremlin planning the next Soviet move. Hitler again bore a striking resemblance to Charlie Chaplin, and drew some laughs from the audience. The Yalta Conference came into Part 1 of the film. Churchill was represented as a bad-tempered brute who had no desire to open a second front. Roosevelt was shown in a most favourable light, tactfully intervening when Churchill proposed a toast to the King, to suggest one to Kalinin instead, and so saving the awkward situation!

Personally, I took strong objection to the scene where an English representative of Vickers flew to Berlin to see Goering just before the Battle of Stalingrad to arrange a sale of wolfram and other strategic materials to the Germans to ensure their victory. If I had seen this in England, I might have found it funny, but the thought that the Soviet audience lapped up these

## PENELOPE IN MOSCOW

lies without question was pretty infuriating. I could not contain myself and rose from my seat and started to make a speech. I came to the end of my Russian after only a few unintelligible words and was continuing in English when Serge angrily pulled me back into my place, afraid of the consequences of my hysterical behaviour. No one arrested me. Some people turned round, shrugged their shoulders, and looked back at the screen. Russian drunks often make peculiar speeches in public, so they were not surprised!

By Part II, Alyosha had joined the Army and Natasha was deported to Germany. She was beaten up by the Nazis for attempting to make a speech in Russian. But the Soviet armies advanced inexorably on Berlin; Stalin continued to give well thought-out orders from the Kremlin; Hitler and his henchmen grew more and more panicky. The Russians reached the outskirts of Berlin and liberated the concentration camp where Natasha had been imprisoned. Alyosha was among the liberators, but he failed to find his beloved. Berlin was surrounded. Hitler gave an order to flood the Underground and while thousands of civilians were drowning in agony, he escaped to his deepest air raid shelter with some of his closest followers to go through a marriage ceremony with Eva Braun. Then the whole wedding party took poison.

Meanwhile the Soviet flag was hoisted on to the Reichstag and Berlin fell at last. As soon as this was realised by the Russians, they whipped out accordions and danced in the streets. Posters bearing pictures of Stalin were soon put up everywhere and one saw the Generalissimo himself step from his special aircraft to congratulate his victorious people. Marshal Zhukov, who incidentally had briefly appeared a couple of times in the Kremlin scenes, was never shown during the actual Battle of Berlin. Alyosha found his Natasha in the midst of the general turmoil and Stalin remembered him and beamed at them both. It was made quite plain that Stalin was the real hero of the film and Alyosha merely incidental. The music was by Shostakovitch. The film was a huge success in

## CHAPTER FIVE

Moscow and there were queues besieging the ticket office every day while it was on.

The first puppet show I saw was *Under the Flutter of Her Eyelashes*, a skit on Hollywood, which had some quite clever touches. Before the show started Obratsov, the director, made a speech, explaining that its object was to expose to the audience the crude, uncultured, inartistic, capitalistic efforts at filming undertaken by America. These films, Obrantsov went on, were exported all over the world and now his puppets would show everyone what they were really like and how they were really made.

The curtain went up on a fat cinema magnate smoking a huge cigar and talking into two telephones at once, and for the next three hours or so we were meant to witness the truth about Hollywood. The puppets were brilliantly manipulated, and the voices were even given an American intonation. On the other hand, the accompanying American jazz music appeared to delight rather than repel the audience. Incidentally, I was told in Moscow that certain fortunate university students who have managed to acquire old jazz records play them over and over again to a select circle of their more intimate friends. Officially American jazz is condemned, but I would hazard a guess that if asked whether he agreed with the banning of Picasso's pictures and of jazz music, the average Russian would say "Yes" to the former and "No" to the latter.

Militant Communist propaganda pervaded every form of entertainment. Serge was once amused by one scene in a revue where a violent attack was delivered on the retention of French words in the Russian language, immediately followed by the appearance on the stage of an attendant ("conférencier" in Russian) who announced "Entr'acte." On another occasion we went to see a revue, with Soviet jazz music, described as political strip-tease. A very masculine and brutal "Uncle Sam" began his seduction of "Marshallised Europe" by offering the lady a bag of dollars. The lady naturally thought Sam was on the level, and to her intense surprise found that in

## PENELOPE IN MOSCOW

no time she was minus, not only her clothes—those which could be removed without offending Soviet standards of morality—but also the bag of dollars.

We saw another show of the same type at the Tchaikovsky Hall—*Intourist* got us the tickets. The Tchaikovsky Hall itself is modern and the seats are arranged in a circular fashion so that you can see the stage perfectly from wherever you sit. First we watched a series of folk dances, executed by girls in exquisite national costumes. I wondered why one never saw pretty girls like that in the streets. The male dancers had a dynamic sense of rhythm which made all Western efforts at executing Russian dances look like pale imitations.

The second part of the programme was called "Two May Days". The first took place under Tsarist rule, when political pamphlets were distributed by a young revolutionary who delivered an impassioned speech (brilliantly mimed), just before the ominous Tsarist police appeared and finally closed in on the crowd. Secondly came the modern May Day, just as we had recently seen it, only with the addition of some very fine national dances. The show ended with a piece entitled "Football", a fast-moving mimicry of a football match—highly appreciated by the audience. I decided that I preferred my political propaganda set to music and dance, rather than shovelled at me in films like *The Battle of Stalingrad*.

The Moscow circus, too, mixed its politics with acrobatics. There were altogether too many acrobats, each set rather like the other, distinguished only by the different colour schemes of their outfits. It was the conjuror who introduced politics: the stage held a huge wooden head called "Western Culture" into which marched: (1) "The American gentleman" (2) "American literature"—exclusively represented by bandits and gangsters—and (3) "American jazz"—luscious ladies wobbling their anatomies. The conjuror then proceeded to turn the head upside down. When he had removed the lid it was seen to be quite empty again. So much for Western culture!

## CHAPTER FIVE

Paul Robeson's visit to Moscow was highly publicised and successful. For obvious reasons: he is a Negro, pro-Communist, and also has a voice which goes straight to the Russian heart. At the only concert for which we were able to get seats there was a free fight to get in and the police were overwhelmed. The audience called for encore after encore. Robeson adopted the Russian practice of clapping himself in answer to the applause he received: everyone was delighted.

The first picture gallery I went to was the Moscow "National Gallery"—the "Tretiakov". My impression was of acres of wall space sown with bad and indifferent pictures, from the time of Peter the Great onwards. Valiantly I struggled through room after room. My main object was to see the few rooms containing early religious paintings. Only one of these was accessible, for the warden said that the roof over the others was being repaired. I determined to go back later, for the one "early" room I did see more than fulfilled my expectations. I returned twice to the gallery before the room was made safe enough for visitors to admire some of the best paintings ever produced in Russia.

On my second visit I took my young Russian teacher Sonia to see how she reacted to "Socialist realism" in art. She was very scornful about one picture featuring a moon which she declared looked exactly like a piece of cheese, but otherwise, as long as the painting faithfully portrayed the subject, she was satisfied. We walked on through a room showing anti-Western propaganda posters, and then through the modern sections of the gallery which were largely covered with faithful likenesses of Lenin and Stalin. So much for painting.

Not long after we were taken on a journalists' conducted tour over the Kremlin. We were neither shown into the very lovely churches (closed to "Imperialists" since the end of the war) nor over the old palace, where repairs were being carried out. So the major part of our two hour tour was spent in the modern palace and museum. In the former we were made to linger for a long time in the hall where the Supreme Soviet

## PENELOPE IN MOSCOW

holds its sessions and which all the foreign journalists know only too well. The museum is full of priceless treasures which once belonged to the Tsars—a richer edition of the Tower of London exhibits. "How many dollars is that stuff worth?" asked a correspondent, pointing to a rich selection of beautiful ornaments worn by the Tsars. "It has never been estimated," replied the guide haughtily, as she swept us all out.





## Chapter 6

*Summer in the park. Moscow mothers and their quiet, obedient children. Food problems and minor irritations.*

JUNE 12TH was Trinity Day, and we decided to look into some of the churches. The first was so packed that we gave up the idea. There was a queue of worshippers carrying branches blocking the entrance. We gave a few coins to the beggars and cripples outside and went into rather a poor-looking church with a flat roof, in which three funerals and fifteen baptisms were going on at the same time! The infants' lusty yells competed with the sound of the nails being driven into the coffins on the other side of the church. I got quite a shock when I discovered that during funerals in the Orthodox rite the face of the dead person is left uncovered. We left the funeral service quite quickly to go and look at the babies. According to the Orthodox tradition, only the god-parents and not the parents should be present at the baptism. This custom was not

## PENELOPE IN MOSCOW

observed, we noticed, and we heard a woman complaining about it to her neighbour.

During June of 1919 we enjoyed a spell of lovely warm weather. In summer the Moscow crowd looks gayer and more colourful than during the long winter. Many of the women had discarded their woollen shawls and wore kerchiefs or went bareheaded. Those who did not have long hair (generally scraped back and plaited round their heads) sported very bad perms which they had surely never combed out. The cotton dresses were very "provincial"—badly cut, with ugly designs, or plain-coloured, often in a nauseating pastel shade.

Whenever I had a few hours to spare between Russian lessons, writing letters home, meals and parties, I would go and sit in one of the squares or gardens, armed with a novel or my Russian grammar. My favourite place was called Alexandrovski Park. It ran along one of the walls of the Kremlin and was full of very green grass, shady trees and flowers. I particularly enjoyed the peony season. It was forbidden to walk on the grass but there was a plentiful supply of benches and two or three sandpits for the amusement of the smaller children. Mothers or grandmothers would sit for hours watching their young ones play. Most of these were under seven, the school starting age.

There was always a murmured chorus of "Nelzia" (Don't) from the anxious mothers as one child would crawl on to the grass or another would start touching a stranger's belongings. I hardly ever heard a mother or grandmother raise her voice to a child. If little Tommy did not obey the first "Nelzia," the chances were that he would turn round and take some notice of the third or fourth one. If he became too obstreperous, he was reasoned with. Never was a boy or girl slapped as far as I could see.

I once went to a show at the Children's Puppet Theatre. There was a friendly rabbit, a bear, a wolf, a goose, a gosling, a hen, a goat and the villain of the piece, the wicked cat. The cat would persist in pouncing on anything smaller than itself and in the end all the other animals united to lead it away with



## CHAPTER SIX

a rope round its neck. Most members of the audience were under seven, so I do not suppose that they attached any political significance to the show.

I am sure that the Russians love children. They seem to have an inexhaustible supply of patience as well as a genuine and deep understanding of child nature. That was certainly the impression I got from my observations from park benches. The children themselves did not appear to be particularly disobedient or inischievous and I seldom saw any fights or tearful scuffles. Older children assumed a protective air towards the smaller ones. English and French children are livelier, but then it seems to be in the Russian nature to be phlegmatic, maybe owing to the cold climate. Sometimes I would see children with tricycles or scooters—never bicycles. No one cycles in Moscow. I noticed that the Soviet mothers took far more care over their children's clothes than over their own.

Some time in the middle of June, the heat-wave broke—quite a pleasant change, for it had been getting hotter and hotter, and our bedroom windows could only be opened in small sections. Never had I seen so much dust before, not even in London. The hotel maids thought the dust terrible, too, but adopted an attitude of mere passive resistance.

They amused me with their worry about my thinness. A thin woman in Russia is regarded as suffering from under-nourishment or an illness. Maria had already decided that I must be ill, for it was obvious from my clothes that I could afford to eat well. I was not amused, however, but really embarrassed when, one morning, a maid I had not seen before stopped in the middle of cleaning our room to say, "I am thin and so are you, but I am thin because I don't get decent food to eat and you do, don't you?" I replied that I did and hoped the conversation would not be continued, but the maid persisted: "Look at the shabby clothes I wear and then look at what you have in your wardrobe." I dealt with this by: "Hardly anything you see there is at all new but we have good materials at home."

## PENELOPE IN MOSCOW

This maid was younger than most of the others and wore a tattered brown dress hardly reaching to her knees, and no cap or apron. I was sorry for her but at the same time I did not like her. She made me feel uneasy. Perhaps I was merely undergoing a twinge of capitalist conscience. It was strictly forbidden to give presents to the hotel staff, all of whom were searched every night before they went home, so in any case there was nothing I could do.

But the maids were certainly right in assuming that I ate well. By this time I was beginning to get tired of smoked salmon and other Moscow delicacies. The menus were everywhere monotonously the same. Nothing was sufficiently seasoned, and vegetables, other than cabbage, were rare. I was glad to find tomatoes appearing at last, but the lettuces were disappointing and the dressing was made with sunflower oil whose taste I never got used to.

Another thing which gradually became irritating was the Russian assumption that they were always right and knew what was best in every circumstance. When I once went shopping with my Russian teacher, she just would not let me buy the biscuits I wanted as she considered that they were too dear. Serge had particularly expressed his preference for them but that made no difference. Or there was the waiter who brought me my coffee every morning. He considered that milk was good for me and it was impossible to prevent him from pouring the whole contents of the milk jug into my cup. He knew I objected, so he would choose a moment when I wasn't looking!



## Chapter 7

*Leningrad—a touch of the West, and of half-destroyed beauty. I go to Moscow football matches. Midsummer in dacha-land. More National Days and receptions.*

AT the end of June we visited Leningrad. We travelled “soft,” and so were four in a sleeping compartment.

In Soviet sleeping cars the sexes are not divided. Our companion—we had only one—was an elderly and very small Red Army man who had carefully shaved off what little had remained of his hair. We shared our picnic supper and bottle of French wine with him. He was excessively polite, taking every possible opportunity to kiss my hand with effusive “Madames”. He carefully shut the door whilst we were eating, indicating by a picturesque gesture that he wanted to guard against eavesdroppers.

The door having been closed, the little soldier said wistfully

that he wished he spoke French, adding that he liked the French and the English but loathed the Germans. "They called us Russian pigs," he explained. Serge tried to soothe him. "Oh, but we Russians are pigs," the soldier expostulated. "During the war, whenever our Army took over a nicely kept house vacated by the Germans, our men turned it into a pig-sty in no time. Not all Russians are like that though. There are some very cultured ones, but there are too few of them." After this confession we had a final drink and retired into our comfortable bunks.

At 11-30 the following morning, we arrived in Leningrad. A big bedroom and sitting room had been reserved for us through *Intourist* at the Astoria Hotel. We would have preferred something less classy and expensive. Leningrad with its well-proportioned buildings, open spaces, lovely parks, and the broad Neva, still has more of the air of a capital city than Moscow. However, its streets seemed strangely empty and silent after the crowds and hubbub of Moscow. After leaving our things at the hotel we went straight to the "Hermitage", the Leningrad "National Gallery", and for the next four hours never stopped walking. The "Hermitage" adjoins the Winter Palace, a wondrous green and white building facing the Neva. It contains one of the finest collections of pictures and *objets d'art* in the world. The fact that in itself it is a beautiful palace adds to one's enjoyment when looking at the pictures. In the evening we went to the ballet. We saw *The Dead Princess and the Seven Knights*, a ballet based on one of Pushkin's tales. I could not decide whether I preferred the Leningrad to the Moscow ballet school—one performance was too little to judge from. The Leningrad ballet audience was a little shabbier than the "Bolshoi" audience in Moscow. The women did not look as if they were trying quite so hard to be fashionable.

We were lucky enough to see an almost white night: a week or two earlier it would have been light the whole night. The next morning we visited what remains of "Peterhof", the palace built by Peter the Great on the Baltic Sea, to enable him

## CHAPTER SEVEN

to look out westwards towards Finland, as it was from the West that he had drawn his inspiration for the construction of St. Petersburg and for many other things. Unlike to-day's Russian rulers, he liked looking West.

On the way to Peterhof we passed buildings shelled and burnt out by the Germans and we were shown the spot where the advance of the German Army was arrested. We were glad to see that the majority of the famous gilded Peterhof fountains was working again. Most of them were identical copies of the pre-war models, but the Nazis had seen to it that precious little was left of the palace itself, or of the garden.

From Peterhof we went back to Leningrad to see Smolny, once a monastery but now the Leningrad Communist Party's headquarters. The green trees formed a pleasant background for the lovely blue and white building. We peeped into the monastery church, now a dump for all sorts of building materials. Our last excursion before dinner was to the Peter-and-Paul Fortress, once the dreaded prison for enemies of the Tsars. After dinner we were taken by acquaintances to visit a Russian family—an elderly man, his son and daughter-in-law, and a grandchild. They did not appear to be as badly housed as the average Moscow family. We saw two sitting-rooms and guessed that there must have been at least two bedrooms behind the doors which were not opened.

The following day we visited Tsarskoe Selo, now known as Pushkin. We had ordered a small car from *Intourist* to take us there, but after we had been impatiently waiting for it for twenty minutes, we were casually informed that it was not in a fit state to take us as the brakes did not work, but we could have a big car instead. After inquiring about the price we said no, thank you, we would go by train. Could we see a time-table? *Intourist* neither had such a thing nor did they know anything about the hours of trains to Pushkin. One hotel's *Intourist* personnel singularly resembled another hotel's *Intourist* personnel.

We finally found a train which left for Pushkin forty

## PENELOPE IN MOSCOW

minutes after we had arrived at the station. For the last part of the trip we travelled in a very over-crowded bus full of peasants armed with great sacks of milk containers. As it was Monday, the museums were closed, and we found Pushkin pleasantly deserted. I was extremely impressed by what remains of the facade of the palace. Only the shell remains, but it is most beautiful: a huge, well-proportioned Italian style building in blue and white with beige decorations. The battle-scarred caryatids, seen from a certain distance, appear with their bowed heads to be solemnly weeping over the destructiveness of war. It is not quite certain whether the Germans destroyed Pushkin or whether the Russians were forced to do so to destroy the German occupants.

We spent the whole of the sunny afternoon in the lovely park where we found that the Germans had systematically partially or wholly wrecked all the more attractive buildings, leaving intact only those of least artistic value, such as the Chinese style bridges and pagodas. We decided to go for a row on the lake. "It is forbidden on Mondays," we were informed. Serge said that we had come all the way from Moscow. The man guarding the barrier was not impressed, but when Serge added that we had come all the way from Paris, he opened the gate immediately and we were allowed to choose our boat. Our return journey to Moscow was uneventful.

With June the holiday season began. My Russian teacher, Sonia, took hers in that month.

She went to a "Rest Home" in Riga, a town strictly forbidden to foreigners. I asked what the rest home was like and she told me that each person on holiday had his or her own bedroom but no one was allowed into it during the daytime. There was a reading room, a rest room, a dining room, and so on, and I gathered that all activities were organised and communal.

"Rest Homes" are very popular in the USSR, and there are always far more applications for places than there are vacancies. Individual Russians do not go off for trips on their

## CHAPTER SEVEN

own during the summer. Their education tends towards making them collective-minded; and, in any case, considering the car and hotel shortage, the bad roads and overcrowded trains, an organised holiday must certainly be the safest venture.

An alternative is to visit friends or relatives who possess a "dacha" (cottage) in the country. But during the summer months you would be sure to find Uncle Joseph, Aunt Mary and their three children, apart from Grandma and Great Aunt Helen already installed, so it wouldn't be much of a rest and you certainly would not get a room—and perhaps not even a bed—to yourself!

Nevertheless, the dacha, or timber country cottage, is a great feature of Soviet summer life. There is a quota of dachas within the authorised section of the then authorised 50 km. perimeter of Moscow which is available for those foreigners who can afford them. We used to visit friends who had a dacha standing in the midst of Soviet and Satellite dachas. (There were a few "imperialists" nearby, too.) I was told by my friends that holiday fraternisation with non-imperialist neighbours was not as easy as it used to be. The timber cottages stood in a green glade in the middle of a lovely forest full of exciting wild flowers and mushrooms and even a few wild strawberries. The dacha at which we stayed had two or three small rooms and a veranda. There was no running water or indoor sanitation, but then the place was only used in the summer.

One week-end we spent with our friends was a wet one. It rained so hard that we had to put on g胶shes and macintoshes to visit the w.c. at the bottom of the garden. On our way to the dacha in our friends' car we became stuck in a sea of mud and were finally rescued by an MVD lorry. The driver was extremely amiable and deplored our situation. But it was one of us who had to suggest to him that, as he had not got any tow rope, he might improvise a substitute with wire from an old fence which was lying in pieces all over the place. This worked.

## PENELOPE IN MOSCOW

We learned that some foreign residents living in one of the neighbouring dachas had just been away for a week and returned to find their dacha emptied of its household goods. Here in the country there were no policemen stationed outside foreign residences to frighten away thieves.

Back in Moscow, I woke up one day to find no hot water coming from the tap. Breakdown. After two days I asked one of the many hotel maids if she could bring me some hot water in a can. That apparently was quite impossible. There was only one can in the whole hotel and it was reserved for making tea. However, there was a tiny teapot which could be spared, so if I liked that could be filled with hot water for me. We secured the can in the end after ringing up the hotel administration. I ought to have learnt by this time that it is never any good getting annoyed over the Russian way of life. One must never think too logically. True, I had seen plenty of cans in the shops, but it was just silly to expect the Metropole Hotel management to purchase any merely because of a lurch in the hot water supply.

The Russians could indeed appear a strangely phlegmatic people who would never react as one might expect. For instance, I was told one day that some pipes had burst somewhere near our hotel, and several houses were flooded. I went to have a look, and saw the inhabitants quietly watching their possessions drown until the workmen arrived. No tears and no panic—and no apparent attempt at rescue.

By mid-July the rain came down almost every day, and the grass in the parks looked miraculously green and fresh. I had just finished unpacking my summer clothes. I noticed that in the evenings Russian women were now blossoming out into silk and rayon prints, with longer skirts. Civilian men, however, still wore ordinary suits made of poor material.

On the evening of July 13th a French friend just back from his holiday burst into our room and suggested that we should celebrate the Fall of the Bastille, as it was almost midnight. "You must both come with me immediately and drink some



## CHAPTER SEVEN

champagne," he proposed. And so we went to the notorious "Cocktail Hall". This bar is situated in Gorky Street, Moscow's Piccadilly, and is a favourite haunt of foreigners and Soviet secret agents, or so one is always told. Some of the Russians there on this occasion were certainly far too drunk to be useful agents of any sort. We stood up at the bar and ordered champagne cocktails. Our French friend was in fine form and started to tell us the latest sexy joke from Paris, which had to be demonstrated with a handkerchief. A Russian standing near us stared at us so suspiciously that the story was translated into Russian for him. He was absolutely delighted, roared with laughter, and shook all our hands warmly! Once the ice was broken, some other Russians also started talking to us. One young man, sitting with a girl who was singing sentimental songs quietly to herself, got up and offered me his seat. I politely raised my glass "to the USSR." The young man returned the compliment raising his to "a democratic England." I do not for one minute imagine that we drank to the same sort of democracy.

I went to my first football match in Moscow at the gigantic Dynamo Stadium. I have never been a football enthusiast and was, I am afraid, chiefly impressed by the fierce and rugger-like scrum which took place in front of the ladies' cloakroom. This was a very public and collective affair and had only one narrow entrance. It was necessary to know how to push—and to push hard—in order to penetrate to the interior—and by then it was too late for me to flee in horror. I had never previously seen a mass women's lavatory with no doors. Football, the favourite Soviet outdoor sport, is also something of a social occasion. Young girls put on their best-fitted artificial (or real) silk frocks, and their escorts—with their hair neatly plastered down—gallantly rush forward with ices, cakes or sausages (Frankfurter type) for their girl friends. I have never attended a football match in Russia where the stadium was not absolutely filled to capacity. This same was not the case when I went to the stadium on the occasion of an athletic contest between

## PENELOPE IN MOSCOW

Czechoslovakia and the USSR. Nobody had been warned that the meeting was to be held, and the stadium was almost empty, although it was a rare opportunity to see the famous Zatopek running in Moscow. The competitors marched into the arena, keeping time to suitable music from the orchestra. There were speeches from both sides about sport and peace. Each speech ended with "Long Live Great Stalin." The first time this was said by the Soviet speaker the whole audience rose to its feet as one man and remained standing in reverent silence for at least two minutes.

The day chosen for the annual Soviet Air Display was warm and sunny. Stalin was present and also the whole Politburo, minus Molotov who *really* was on holiday. The exhibition was opened by a formation of aeroplanes which formed the words "Long Live Stalin" in the sky. I was very impressed with the acrobatics. There were women parachutists, followed by a whole flock of male parachute jumpers who filled the sky with a positive cloud of gaily coloured umbrellas, looking for all the world like an airborne beach party. We witnessed a noisy mock battle, aircraft flying in various formations, several new jet models, and a "supersonic" plane which left me breathless and rather uncomfortable.

That evening we had supper at the Metropole Cafe where the service was distinctly better than in the ordinary hotel restaurant. On this occasion we shared a table with a Russian who was concentrating hard on getting drunk. He became very friendly and ordered much more vodka for us than we wanted. The drunker he got, the more embarrassingly polite he became until, in an excess of generosity, he unsteadily picked up a portion of his by-then-congealed fried egg on his fork and tried to push it into Serge's mouth. When Serge shook his head he exclaimed: "But why not? I'm a healthy man!" By the time we were able to get away, he seemed depressed and complained that he would have to sleep alone. Another of our rare personal conversations with Soviet citizens!

July 22nd, in turn, was Polish National Day. Serge and I

## CHAPTER SEVEN

attended the reception at 9 p.m. Luckily it was not until afterwards that I examined the invitation card and saw that only Serge had been asked. It was one minor aspect of the Cold War that by the summer of 1969 correspondents were invited to Communist "national days" professionally and not socially—that is without wives. (The following year they were not asked at all.) As a result, I found myself among a great many people whose faces were new to me, for parties tended to keep to their political zones. I managed to talk to a Czech to whom I was introduced by an Israeli, but otherwise I kept to "my own side". I was not offered an alternative. No—I also talked briefly to a Polish trade representative who had been in England with the Polish Air Force during the war. I asked him to lunch two days later. He accepted, but never came. Which was typical of Moscow life.

## Chapter 8

*I am shown some impressive Moscow schools and children's institutions, and am left wondering about the effectiveness of Soviet education.*

NEXT, Serge and I visited a pioneer camp. The visit was arranged for correspondents. Both "democratic" camps were represented. The pioneers we were taken to see were living in several pleasant, clean timber houses on the edge of a pine forest. Soviet pioneers are—in a way—comparable to British Scouts and Guides. At eight years old, all well-behaved children become pioneers, the insignia being a red scarf, and remain pioneers until the age of fourteen when the select are promoted to the "komsomols."

What we saw was a luxury holiday camp for children of workers from the "Stalin" factory, and one of Moscow's biggest works. We were told that children of lower-paid workers had priority. Apart from the pioneers, there were another 650 young children in the place. Both boys and girls wore white blouses and dark blue shorts. We were shown the dormitories—separate for each sex. They were spotless. There seemed to be a huge number of adults about to look after the children. The camp had a flower garden and facilities for volley ball, football and basketball. We were told that the children were free to choose their own amusements. Embroidery was chosen by some of the boys as well as by many of the girls. Painting was very popular and also reading. There was a library. Regular "nature walks" were organised, and altogether I am sure that a good time was had by all.

Not long after seeing the pioneers' camp, Serge told me that he and other correspondents were to be taken over a pioneers' palace. Reluctantly, permission was given for me to join the party. In any other country it would not have occurred to me

## CHAPTER EIGHT

to accompany my husband on professional outings, for I could make my own arrangements to see what I wanted. In the USSR, on the other hand, unless I took advantage of the few opportunities Serge was accorded to see Soviet institutions, I would have seen nothing at all.

The pioneers' palace consisted of two buildings which once belonged to a rich tea merchant. We were the first to arrive. We waited in the courtyard, enjoying the early sunshine while watching children play in the melting snow. Soon we were joined by the other correspondents who automatically formed themselves into two separate groups, "Right" and "Left", although a little cross-conversation did occur.

When we were all assembled, the visit began. We were told that something like 10,000 children frequented the palace twice a week after school hours. It was like a club and divided into different sections—e.g., arts, sciences, sports—with each child choosing the section he or she was most interested in. We were first shown into a room whose walls were covered with innumerable photographs of Lenin and Stalin, taken at all ages from childhood onward. There the aims and functions of the palace were explained to us. We were told about the special "Lenin-Stalin" room in the palace and I wondered if it could possibly contain more likenesses of the two "leaders" than did the room we were in. We learnt that there was a special series of lectures to enable the children to understand the contents of the Lenin Museum. We were then taken over the library, where we were informed that Mark Twain and Jules Verne were the most popular of foreign authors. The most popular Russian books were those dealing with the lives of Lenin and Stalin, followed by scientific and technical works, the Russian classics and literature on China.

After seeing the library we were taken to hear a poetry recital. A 15-year-old girl got up and, showing no signs of nervousness at the intrusion of so many foreign visitors, dramatically declaimed a poem she had written on the set theme, "Why I love my country". I did not follow most of

the words, but I recognised those eulogising the Soviet Union's love for peace. These particular passages were uttered in a distinctly menacing tone. "The Soviet people do not like the atom bomb" was another line I understood. The next item on the programme was a poem by Maiakovsky, the great revolutionary poet, well recited by a girl of about the same age as the author of "Why I love my country".

From poetry we passed to carpentry, which occupied a large number of boys. I was surprised to see almost as many girls as boys busy constructing wireless sets. Others were making model boats. In the arts section, the best paintings were water colours done by a boy of 13 who was evidently more talented than his elders who exhibited in the Tretyakov Gallery. The embroidery and handicraft class was in full swing. We spoke to a few of the children who were friendly and not at all shy. Some were busy on needlework pictures, just like those my grandmother always loved to do. We glanced at the pressed flowers which were arranged and framed like pictures. Then we asked if we could visit the dancing class. Unfortunately we were just too late and merely got a glimpse of crowds of small girls in their underclothes scurrying to the dressing room.

Next came a concert rehearsal. The singing master was evidently popular with his pupils, and we all sat down and relaxed and listened contentedly to the youthful choruses. From singing we passed on to photography. In this section we saw several good colour photographs. Then the instructor, with great pride, showed us samples of two different processes for reproducing photographs. One was on silk, which was preferred by many of the girls. Both samples were reproductions of photographs of Stalin.

Before we left we were invited to ask questions. One correspondent wanted to know how delinquent children were dealt with. The answer was that there were none. However that may have been, the general impression was certainly of contented and healthy children interested in and enthusiastic about their occupations. Whatever I might think of the

## CHAPTER EIGHT

indoctrinated Stalin-worship, it did not in the least worry the children, who absorbed it naturally along with their studies and games. This is an important point. Children in the USSR take Communism as much for granted from their earliest years as European children take for granted whatever religion they are taught to believe in. With this difference however: the Soviet child is never exposed to contrary influences.

Besides being taken over Pioneer Camps and seeing how children spent their leisure, we were also shown two schools. I did not accompany Serge and the other journalists on their visit to a boys' school from which they all returned extremely impressed by its up-to-date scientific equipment. An American correspondent said that you could not find better in any school in the US. Of course we all realised that there were probably very few schools in the Soviet Union quite as well equipped as those shown to foreigners.

On another occasion I went with Serge and some of his colleagues to look over a girls' school. It had over 800 pupils. Classes varied from 35 to 40, 42 being the maximum allowed. The interior of the building reminded me very much of an English school: even the draughts were similar. The children were aged from 7 to about 17 and all wore high white collars on their long-sleeved dark brown dresses, and black tunics over them. Pigtailed seemed to be part of the uniform too; we saw very few short-haired girls.

We listened to part of a literature lesson. "Art for art's sake" was under discussion, and was condemned as a bourgeois principle. The teacher made her point perfectly clear to the children (and to us). I enjoyed the tiny tots' Russian lesson. They were learning the characters of the alphabet and forming words. That was definitely the class for me. The geography lesson dealt with England. A map was pinned up and the teacher was enumerating the various industrial products of different parts of the country, and explaining the decadence of the British social and economic system. The children, about 13 or 14 years old, all listened attentively.

The anatomy class was altogether beyond me. So was the apparatus in the physics class. In another room we were shown the results of a variety of holiday tasks: an array of neatly pressed butterflies, a selection of pressed leaves and flowers, attractively arranged, some animal drawings and several models of mushrooms, copied most realistically.

The woman director was most affable. When we remarked on the good behaviour of the children, she told us that punishment was almost completely unnecessary. Even whispering in class, she added, was indulged in merely owing to intense interest in the subject being taught and was caused by an irrepressible desire to discuss a point with a neighbour. "Do the children work satisfactorily?" one of us inquired. "They all love their studies," she replied, "and their two great ambitions at school are, firstly, to become pioneers at the age of eight, and secondly, to become komsomols at the age of 14." "Are there any backward children?" one of the journalists asked. "No." "Is anyone ever expelled?" was the next question. "At this school we have never had an expulsion," the director said proudly, "and there were only two girls out of the whole school who were not moved up to a higher form at the end of last year, and that was owing to illness."

She then explained to us the various "circles" the children could belong to in order to specialise in subjects of their choice outside school hours. "We find the parents very helpful," she went on, "for it is part of our policy to encourage close co-operation between them and our teachers and it works out admirably."

"What foreign languages are taught?" Serge inquired. "English and German." "Which English authors are studied?" asked a British correspondent. "Shakespeare, Dickens and Byron. Any more questions?" "Yes, is there any political education?" The director smiled and said that the older girls naturally learned all about the Soviet constitution. It was getting late and we were all beginning to feel hungry. "Do the children eat at school?" I asked. The director



## CHAPTER EIGHT

shook her head. "We do not provide any meals and our pupils work in two separate shifts owing to lack of space, but that is only temporary."

We thanked her warmly and left.

It had been a most interesting visit. The atmosphere of the school seemed pleasant, the teachers seemed friendly, and none of the girls appeared shy or self-conscious. Discipline, too, was evidently good. Was it, in fact, too good? I realised that it was impossible to reach any conclusions about Soviet education after one short visit to one school. It was also obvious that the director had presented things to us under their most favourable light. Nevertheless, I was both impressed and puzzled. Good children grow up into good citizens, but if they are all good, surely they must lack individuality? The teachers were kind to their pupils, I was sure, but I was equally sure that original thought or personal initiative was stifled. It was so cleverly done that the children themselves were not aware of it. "Art for art's sake is a false principle," they were gently told, "for art, like everything else, must serve the community." The children accepted that theory without question, and how many other theories?

Examinations in the Soviet Union are mainly oral. The children must learn well what they have been taught and they must learn exactly what they have been told. Everything is presented as either black or white—which is how things must be presented in the USSR. There are no greys, and none are permitted.



## Chapter 9

*Serge visits a collective farm. I lose my sense of humour.  
We are actually invited to a private Soviet apartment--  
just once.*

LATER in the summer Serge was allowed to spend a day and a night at a collective farm. What he told me on his return was roughly as follows:

"The collective farm is like a village," he said. "There were 1,000 inhabitants at the one we visited, including 400 workers. I visited three of the labourers' houses and they appeared to be well off for space. There was no running water but it was in the process of being laid on. If the farm people work hard, both on the collective farm and in their own gardens, they can live quite well. They are allowed to own just over an acre of private land and usually have a cow, pigs and chickens. They are paid for their labours both in money and kind and if they overfulfil the plan, they are given 25 per cent of the extra produced for themselves.

"They start work at 7 a.m. and do not finish until 8-0 or 9-0 at night at harvest time. They are allowed one and a half hours to two hours off for lunch. After work they like to dance or see a film show of which there are three a week. For dancing they have their own orchestra of 38 musicians recruited from amongst themselves. Only the conductor was hired from outside and the last one was sacked for slackness.

"There are crèches for the children under school age and babies are taken to their mothers in the fields at feeding time. A worker is allowed to leave the farm if he wishes to study but not just if he wishes to leave. I was told that seven or eight left this year and that was considered an exceptionally large number. The women work as hard as the men.

## CHAPTER NINE

"There was one aged 105," Serge continued. "She could no longer work, not because she was too old but because she had had a particularly hard life, as the president took pains to emphasise. The president was a charming man. He showed me everything except the collective farm club, as he said he was not satisfied with it and wanted to build a two-storey one. We saw some of the animals. They all looked healthy and happy to me, but I am not an expert. Artificial insemination is used for the cattle and incubators for the poultry. The hens were apparently fulfilling their norm better than the bees!

"We stayed in a guest house run by a woman of 76. I was amused to see pictures of Lenin and Stalin facing two ikons on her walls! I shared a room with Mr. Z., my Tass colleague. I was disappointed not to be able to eat with the farm labourers, but Mr. Z. had come supplied with a gargantuan feast which included a huge cold roast veal and an equally large lamb, several different cheeses, and I don't know what. He hadn't forgotten the vodka and wine either, so we did ourselves well. We went to bed at 10-0, and had fried eggs for breakfast at 8-0 this morning. Before leaving, Mr. Z. discreetly handed some money to our hostess. She immediately seized his hand and kissed it. He didn't know where to look, poor man. A most embarrassing exhibition in front of a foreigner!"

That is roughly what Serge told me about his day and night of country life. It was the only farm he was permitted to look over in the Soviet Union.

When the Chinese correspondent left Moscow to make way for a representative of the new regime, he suggested to us that we might take on his two larger rooms at the Metropole, which would enable me to do some cooking, and which would only cost five roubles a day more than the fabulous sum we were already paying for ours. I had already bought the necessary pots and pans when we were told by the Hotel authorities (almost everyone who got in our way in Moscow was an authority of

some sort) that we could not take over Mr. Hoh's rooms. No reason was given.

I tried to argue and to plead. I got angry and exclaimed in English that delegations visiting Moscow for a few days only were of course given the better rooms denied to the permanent residents, so that they should think everyone lived well and comfortably in the USSR. My eloquence was wasted and probably not even understood. We were simply and politely informed that our request would finally be refused in writing.

My rather violently anti-Soviet mood was not improved when Serge translated an article from one of the papers for me. It described a Soviet sailor's impressions of London. He spoke of universal unemployment and misery, to say nothing of malnutrition, of the hundreds of people he had seen sleeping on the pavements every night, as they had been turned out of their houses through inability to pay the high rents and British law in addition forbade them to sleep on a park bench! With a shock I realised that after only about four months in the USSR, I was already beginning to lose my sense of humour.

But one morning Serge came into the bedroom from his office looking as pleased as Punch. "What did I tell you?" he exclaimed jubilantly. "He is coming to lunch." "He" was Mr. Z., the man from Tass who had gone with Serge to the collective farm. Serge had said to him that he found it very difficult to get to know Russians and Mr. Z. had asked if he had found that through personal experience or was just quoting what other foreigners said. Serge replied "Both." Mr. Z. gave Serge his telephone number, and Serge rang him up a few days later to ask him and his wife to lunch with us.

Mr. Z. said he would be delighted; only he did not know if his wife would be well enough, as she was in bed with 'flu; but he would ring up on the morning of the day and let Serge know definitely. I had shrugged my shoulders and told Serge that it sounded like the usual answer. But I was wrong. Mr. Z. did come to lunch with us, though without his wife who had still not recovered. Perhaps the 'flu was genuine. Mr. Z. was

## CHAPTER NINE

extremely amiable. I don't think that controversial subjects were discussed. It was an unusual event to entertain a Soviet citizen, and we wondered whether Mr. Z. would ask us to his place as he promised. About two weeks later he did in fact telephone and invite us to dinner.

We were shown into quite a large apartment with at least four rooms apart from kitchen and bathroom. A maid opened the door to us. Mme. Z. spoke French very well which was a great relief to me. I gathered that she was "a woman of leisure", or at any rate I had the feeling that she wished me to think she was. She was nicely dressed in a plain black dress with a fresh frilly white collar. The dinner was more than sumptuous: to begin with caviare, smoked salmon, hard boiled eggs and tomatoes and a mixed salad. We had to have at least one second helping to avoid appearing rude. There followed: Borsch, roast veal and vegetables, and then fruit salad and fresh peaches. After an interval, bad coffee and wonderful home-made pastries were served.

The conversation tended towards the general and literary. Mr. Z. did ask us if we were having any difficulties in getting as many travel permits as we wanted, since other foreign residents were so prejudiced and always complained! Serge ventured to remark that *Intourist* was not helping us over-much. In future, Mr. Z. said, he would do his best to assist us in getting permits, to non-banned areas, of course. And so on. We never actually took him up on his kind offer, and I never saw either him or his wife again. They were pleasant people, but I could not rid myself of the feeling that it was not so much simple friendship which had prompted their invitation to dinner as a desire—or rather an order—to try and prove to foreigners that it is not true that Russians can't mix freely with them and also that it is not true that Russians do not live as well as people in a bourgeois state. I was truly appreciative of their magnificent hospitality, but I was sure there was an ulterior motive.

I am afraid that the only contacts with Russians which are

## PENELOPE IN MOSCOW

prompted by purely friendly feelings are those you cannot talk about while you are in the USSR for fear of getting the people into trouble.

Returning from the dinner, we stopped a car and got a lift back to the Metropole. This was quite illegal but also quite a frequent occurrence. Most cars one saw on the road at night were driven by the chauffeur of some official, only too delighted to earn a few extra roubles for himself and quite willing to take the risk. On this particular night our car was signalled by a policeman, so the driver hastily dashed into a side street and skilfully returned us to our hotel by a roundabout route, giving voice as he did so to his extreme dislike for the arm of the law.

One often had to take roundabout routes even when not attempting to avoid the police. The reason for this was "remont". I suppose the nearest English translation would be "repair works in progress". One day you would be driven along a nice wide street and the very next day you would find a barrier up and all the tram lines in a pile in the middle, with hefty females digging away and lorries full of police hanging around. When one found one's pet restaurant closed it was always because of "remont". If the room you most wanted to visit in a museum was inaccessible "remont" was either the real or fictitious reason given. The Kremlin churches were closed because of "remont". In fact, the visitor to Moscow soon accepts "remont" as one of the facts of life.





## Chapter 10

*We go South. A pub-crawl on the Odessa Riviera. Strange interlude in forbidden Kiev. We return regretfully to Moscow.*

WHEN Serge had nine days' leave due to him, we applied "through the usual channels" for a permit to go to Odessa. Naturally, we could only leave Moscow several days later than we had planned owing to the non-co-ordination between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of the Interior and *Intourist* in their dealings with our papers. Still, we did go.

Our train left on the evening of October 18th, 1909. We were four in a "soft" compartment. I had an upper berth, but was immediately offered a lower one by one of our male travelling companions. He and Serge talked about China. The fourth traveller did not open his mouth for the first 40 hours of

our journey, and then he just said he was against another war and shut it again. We spent two nights in the train which was not provided with a restaurant car, but this did not matter as we had plenty of food with us and were, in addition, able to buy a delicious cold roast chicken from a peasant woman at a halt. She also sold bread and eggs, and was just one among many peasant women selling food at most of the stations. In addition, too, at most larger stations one could jump out on to the platform and warm oneself with hot soup and vodka, followed by hashed cutlets and vegetables if there was time. It was a pleasant change to pass from the grey, cold northern forests to the vast Ukrainian plains and the gay "southern" villages, with their whitewashed houses glistening in the sun.

We arrived at Odessa on the evening of Thursday, October 20th. We were met at the station by a dim-looking woman from *Intourist* and duly conducted to the *Intourist* hotel. We had written in advance to book a room and had asked that it should be small and inexpensive. We were shown into a reasonably large bedroom, full of dust and containing one small bed. The next day we secured a second bed, and the price of the room was in consequence severely increased. We did not have our own bathroom—but in any case we were told there was hot water only once a week. We must have looked very dirty on our arrival, for we were immediately given a pail of boiling water to wash with. But this was a special treat which did not recur. The usual ration was a small jar of hot water every morning which was taken away to be refilled. Like the Hotel Metropole, Hotel Odessa lacked sizeable water jugs.

During our week's stay at Odessa, we ate most of our meals in the gloomy hotel restaurant. The *decor* was dark toned and depressing beyond words, and the music was supplied by one solitary, mournful violinist. However, the food was good; I liked the stuffed cabbage with sour cream, which we never came across in Moscow, and was also pleased to note that Ukrainian cooks were not so shy of salt and pepper as the Russians.



## CHAPTER TEN

Several times we shared our table with a couple from Moscow—a man from one of the Satellite states and his wife. In the capital it would not have been possible for us to eat together. In Odessa, it seemed quite natural. They were pleasant people and it was not difficult to steer clear of controversial subjects. I warmed towards Madame X. when one evening she inadvertently expressed a dislike for the English (whose country she had never visited) and then was so covered with confusion that she hastily went into wild ecstasies over Shakespeare! It was all so pathetic.

Odessa is an attractive town, with plenty of tree-bordered avenues, and with a glorious view over the Black Sea which was quite as blue as the Mediterranean all the time we were there. The central lay-out of Odessa was designed by the Duc de Richelieu, a French 18th-century *émigré*. One of the main streets was named after him until the Russian Revolution, when it was changed to glorify a German Marxist. However, Odessites stubbornly continue to use the old name of Richelieu Street. In consequence the town still has a very French flavour, and what damage it had suffered during the war had been for the most part very neatly repaired.

During the day, we quite often went to "Arcadia", a sheltered beach leading off a "Park of Culture and Rest". It was still sun-bathing weather, though too cold to bathe—anyway too cold for me to bathe. Just a few hardy locals were still to be seen plunging about in the sea, and the rocks were covered with semi-nude bodies. Everyone was friendly and full of smiles, and at times I forgot that I was not in the South of France.

Then there was the Pioneer Palace. It was a handsome white building almost next door to our hotel and so we just walked straight in one day and asked the director, a pleasant looking blonde, if she would show us over. She asked us to come back two days later, but meanwhile made us sit down and showed us photographs and talked to us about the Palace. She even told Serge that she would be very interested if exchanges of

## PENELOPE IN MOSCOW

correspondence could be arranged between Odessa pioneers and the French Communist equivalent, for so far her pioneers had only corresponded with the " democratic " countries.

The Palace had originally belonged to the Vorontsov family. The Roumanians had occupied it during this last war, and when they were gone, so was all the furniture! However, the building was still intact. She explained that the pioneers attended courses or devoted themselves to hobbies of their own choice for two hours, twice a week, outside school hours.

We looked forward to seeing them, but this was not to be. When we asked for the director again on the day and hour she had stated she gave us a distinctly cool reception. In fact, she seemed rather embarrassed. Our hearts fell. She apologised politely and said that she was afraid she could not show us round without *Intourist's* permission. She gave us the name of the *Intourist* man we should apply to. Of course we were unable to get hold of him—we had never expected to.

We were left the museums and the picture gallery in which we could freely wander about. The gallery was uninspiring, but the catacombs fascinating. Here the Odessa Resistance movement had operated during the war. There had even been schools for the children, for a huge section of the population lived underground. We only saw part of the catacombs, as the rest were closed for security reasons. The archaeological museum had one interesting section: it was temporarily closed.

But the Odessa market was fun. It was large, in the open air, dirty but picturesque. The Ukrainian women nearly all had white woollen shawls round their heads, and the men were already wearing their padded (often patched and sometimes torn) winter clothing. I cried out with delight when I saw shrimps for sale, which we ate with black, sticky Ukrainian bread. We tasted some " kvass " and some very new collective farm wine, selected some cold meat and sausages for our picnic lunch, and went off to find a pub where we could eat it. This was not difficult, as Odessa was full of drinking places where you could get different sorts of wine, beer or vodka. The

## CHAPTER TEN

atmosphere in these Ukrainian pubs was very congenial and one afternoon we did a steady round of them—a very pleasant way for a visitor to the Soviet Union to spend an afternoon.

We should have liked to hire a car and visit the country round Odessa, but when we asked *Intourist* we were told briefly that the countryside was of no interest whatsoever—a synonym for “No” in Russian. Despite the various things we could not do while at Odessa, we managed to spend an extremely pleasant week there. In the daytime there was the beach, the market and the pubs, and we went to a different show every night.

Our first outing was to the circus, which boasted some magnificent lions. Then we saw *The House in the Lane*. This was one of the many Soviet anti-American plays and not a good one from any point of view. It was also shown in Moscow, but in a very slightly toned-down version. The plot was highly complicated and involved much funny business relating to certain archives in Berlin, which proved that the Americans had secret dealings with the Nazis during the war. Fiery propaganda speeches were made by a female member of the US Embassy who changed her alliance at the end of the play. Equally fiery propaganda speeches were made by a former Nazi pilot who also suddenly saw the true red light and denounced the Americans, giving as an example of their barbarity the way they behaved towards Goethe's home. At this point the audience applauded loudly. I felt rather sick.

On the Sunday we spent at Odessa we went to a *matinée* of *Tsar Saltan*, an opera taken from a fairy tale by Pushkin with music by Rimsky-Korsakoff. The opera house was full of excited children and though the show was somewhat provincial we enjoyed ourselves very much. That evening we revisited the opera house, this time to see the famous ballet *Red Poppy*. We were lucky to get such a chance, for it had not been shown in Moscow for some time owing to political “remont” (being brought up to date in its political line). What we saw in Odessa was a story about China in the days when the British

maltreated the coolies and encouraged the opium trade. The hero was the captain of a Soviet ship which put in at the Chinese port. Of course, by his gentlemanly attitude towards the "natives", he soon became everyone's darling, with the exception of those Chinese who were in league with the English. There was a plot to kill him—an Anglo-Kuomintang-Chinese plot—which failed and there was a Chinese dancer who fell in love with him. Instead of kisses, the Soviet officer gave her a lecture on Communism. This lecture meant all the world to her, for when, killed by a wicked Kuomintang Chinese, she lay dying in the arms of "the people", with her last breath she passed on to her countrymen the words of hope contained in the Russian's message, while in the meantime the Soviet ship bore the officer away from the Chinese shore. It was not until late in 1950 that we saw the revised version of *Red Poppy* danced by Ulanova in Moscow.

The production was of an infinitely higher standard than at Odessa. We were interested in the changes in the plot. No longer were the British oppressing the Chinese and dosing them with opium. The role of oppressor was assumed by the Americans, with the aid of a few English hangers-on, and opium was replaced by arms illegally brought into the port. It was the same port as before and there was the same Soviet officer. This time, however, the Chinese Communist movement was triumphant, and the ballet ended with the hoisting of a vast new Chinese People's Republic Flag to the tune of the *Internationale*.

Our next evening in Odessa we went to an excellent show of folk dancing and singing. Even the hymns of praise to Stalin were good. A Russian woman behind us greeted the second one of these with a disrespectful "What, again?" in a loud stage whisper to her companion.

The following afternoon we decided to try and get seats for *Missouri Waltz* for that evening. We were told that the theatre was sold out but we might get a chance if we returned at 7-0 and saw the manager. We did this. There were two other

## CHAPTER TEN

people who had come for the same purpose—an Army officer and a poor man. The latter represented the “little man” the Soviet Union makes so much fuss about. He was shabbily dressed but he had saved up enough money to pay for his ticket. “Look,” he begged the manager, and opened his wallet, pointing to the rouble notes. The manager brushed him aside and tickets were given only to the officer and ourselves.

The plot of *Missouri Waltz* was based on the scandals under the Pendergast administration in Kansas City. I was reminded very much of a Hollywood film, the main difference being that in *Missouri Waltz* the gangsters got away with it, as they had the police in their pay. At the climax the hero turned Communist and fled the country as a protest against the American Way of Life, heroically refusing a proposal of marriage accompanied by 750,000 dollars from the lovesick daughter of the chief villain. The audience seemed to love every minute of it.

We were to return to Moscow by an early plane the following morning. It was a lovely, sunny day and we were driven slowly over the cobbled road to the airport. The flight started late as the wireless transmitter had to be fixed. This was our first experience of flying in the Soviet Union. We found ourselves comfortably seated, but with no safety belts or paper bags. The air hostess's job was certainly not that of occupying herself with the needs of the passengers.

At 11-30 in the morning we arrived at Kiev for a twenty minutes' stop. Kiev had been the home town of my husband's parents, and it had been a great disappointment for him to find that it was banned to foreigners. “It's tantalising being here and only getting a chance of looking at the airport,” Serge remarked sadly at 11-35. Three hours later we were still sitting in the aircraft, looking at Kiev airport. Then the miracle happened. We were told to get out of the aircraft as we would not be continuing our journey until the next morning and would be spending the night in Kiev. I found out later that we owed our luck to radiator trouble, but at the time our only

concern was whether we would be able to see something of this ancient town before dusk, or whether, as it was a prohibited area, we would be confined to the hotel.

Another miracle—we were treated just like the Russian passengers and no one looked at us suspiciously. We were all taken to the airport hotel and shown into our dormitories. Men and women were separated. There was a common wash-basin with running cold water for everyone, and the WC was in the middle of a field. This was not an *Intourist* hotel but just a hostel for aviation personnel, and for passengers in emergency cases like ours. The proprietress was extremely amiable and apologised to us for the simple accommodation and inquired if there was anything she could do to make us comfortable. I timidly asked for one of the beds with a bedside table. It was not free but before I could protest it was arranged for me to have it. For once I was being treated as an honoured guest, and not as a suspicious war-monger. We asked the manageress if it would be all right for us to visit the town. She looked very surprised that we should have asked, and explained the electric light system to us in case we should be back late.

We left our things in our respective rooms and jumped into a private car which we mistook for a taxi and asked the driver to take us to St. Sophia Cathedral. He explained that as he was not a taxi driver, he would have to be careful to leave us somewhere where there were no policemen around as he was not authorised to drive ordinary passengers. He left us just near the Cathedral which is now a museum. It was closed in preparation for an exhibition, but this was our lucky day; having been refused admission by an angry charwoman, we button-holed a man who looked like a civil servant, just as he was coming out. He turned out to be the director, and although it was strictly against the rules, he took pity on us and allowed us to go in. The charwoman threw a disapproving look as we were ushered past her. Some terrific washing and cleaning was going on and busy people were scurrying to and fro. The director vanished and no one took any notice of us, much to our

## CHAPTER TEN

relief. We were able to see all we wanted and even to glance at the exhibition of photographs and prints of Ukrainian churches before it had been approved by the authorities! We made a quick exit and got away just before the official inspection took place, for we recognised the director among the group of people approaching us.

The Cathedral had luckily been left intact by the Germans and I was very much impressed by the extraordinary beauty of the early frescoes and mosaics.

From the Cathedral we took a taxi and drove to the famous monastery, Lavra, overlooking the Dnieper. The oldest and most interesting church was just a mass of rubble surrounding the jagged remains of what were once walls. A notice told us that the church had been wantonly destroyed by the Nazi-Fascist barbarians. The other monastery buildings which were damaged were to be reconstructed in three or four years' time, our very excellent guide told us. Unfortunately we had no time to see the undamaged part of the monastery, which is still in the hands of the church and which houses a large number of monks' bodies, miraculously preserved from decay because of the saintly lives they led. These monks died many centuries ago, but the miracle of their preservation was exploded by the ungodly when it was discovered that the body of a rich landowner in the same spot had been equally well preserved.

Our guide explained the miracle by the quality of the soil and air, but the Orthodox Church was apparently still obstinate and still, as he put it, tried to mislead the ignorant. Although we were not able to visit the dead monks, we did see the body of the landowner by match-light in the museum. He was certainly a very remarkable sight. He had been dead about a couple of centuries, and rather resembled a very old, browned wax figure.

Kiev was badly damaged during the war and there was still no main street when we were there. Reconstruction work, however, was going on at great speed. We dined in a little café and returned to our hotel by bus. I was lucky to be one of only

## PENELOPE IN MOSCOW

three women in my dormitory. I longed to open a window as there was no air whatsoever but I didn't dare, as I knew the Russian fear of fresh air. One of my room-mates was an attractive and charming young girl who was frankly and naively fascinated at meeting a Frenchwoman.

"You are very lucky to be able to visit the Soviet Union," she said, a little sadly, "for I cannot go to France." "Tell me," she then asked with animation, "are there apples in France like ours? Are French girls as plump as Russian girls? Is it better in France than here?" I tactfully replied that French architecture was not more beautiful than Russian architecture. The girl then immediately went into ecstasies over the Moscow Metro. "Certainly that is more beautiful than anything we have in Paris," I managed to say, and that seemed partly to console her for not being allowed to visit Paris. England did not interest her so much as France. "It is very foggy there, isn't it?" was all she asked. The other girl did not join in our conversation and looked at me suspiciously—but perhaps that was all my imagination and she merely wanted to get to sleep! Both girls worked for the air line.

We left for Moscow at 7-40 a.m. and arrived without further incident at 10-30. Serge's assistant met us at the airport where he was told that our flight would not be getting in until an hour after we actually landed. When we confronted the airport official with our persons and pointed out his error, he merely murmured "Oh, really?" and busied himself with other matters.

It was sad getting back to the greyness of winter in Moscow. We dined out many times on our Kiev adventure which sounded almost incredible to our friends.





## Chapter 11

*Brief encounters. Elena and Vera. Mid-Victorian manners in Moscow.*

THE anniversary of the October Revolution was the next big event in our lives. It was really just like May 1st, only it was colder and Stalin was not there. We were in our places on the Red Square well before 10-0 and we duly watched the military parade; we looked at and were almost deafened by the aircraft whizzing overhead, and we admired the colourful civilian procession. All journalists had to slip unobtrusively away soon after 11-0 to join their typewriters at the Telegraph Office. I tried to find my way back to the Metropole with another correspondent's wife.

We got into a tube somewhere but were not allowed out at the station nearest to the hotel. Short of joining the civilian procession ourselves, there seemed no way of getting to the

## PENELOPE IN MOSCOW

Metropole, so we decided instead to try and join our husbands. All went well till we got to Gorky Street which we had to cross. We both showed our passes and I was told that mine was not in order. My friend was informed that hers was quite correct. (Afterwards we discovered that the reverse was true.) Being determined to cross Gorky Street, I gave a hard push to the irritating policeman who was questioning my valid pass—something I would never dare to do in England! In Moscow it did not matter and we finally reached the Telegraph Office.

Some days later, while waiting somewhere, I had a chance to talk to Elena, the Russian governess of a friend of ours, and a competent and intelligent girl. We got on to the subject of marriage. "It used to be very depressing here," she confided in me. "Until a short while ago, the same building was used for registering births, marriages, divorces and deaths. Now it's better, for the births and marriages have been separated from the divorces and deaths but that isn't really enough. Have you heard about the latest scheme?" I said I hadn't. Elena leant forward and half whispered, trembling with suppressed excitement: "There is talk of creating some really smart marriage registry offices, with carpets and flowers and maybe"—(here her voice dropped to a real whisper)—"when my daughter is grown up, she will be able to marry in a white dress! That would be wonderful." "You can still marry in church, though, can't you?" I ventured. Elena looked at me pityingly. "Only superstitious people believe in religion now," she said firmly. "But do have a cup of tea, won't you? The water's almost boiling."

I sank into an armchair.

"How many lumps?"

"I don't take sugar, thank you, Elena."

"You don't take sugar?" Elena looked seriously perturbed. "All Russians like sugar in their tea," she went on. "And I thought English people did too."

"I am an exception," I smiled in reply. "But I suppose I couldn't have a little milk?"

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Elena looked puzzled. "You don't like sugar but you do take milk; now that seems very funny to a Russian. We never add milk to our tea."

"Lemon, then?" I inquired.

"Lemons are often not available in Moscow and when they are, they are too dear."

"How old is your daughter?" I then asked.

"Masha has just had her eighth birthday. Oh, she is a scream! The other day she went to the opera with an aunt to see a children's ballet, *The Little Stork*, and she told me that during the first interval a boy from her school came up to her and asked her who had scratched her hand so badly. Masha said it was her cat, which is very vicious. During the next interval the boy came up again and wanted to know how many cats Masha had. When I asked her what happened then, she wrinkled her forehead and explained: 'You see, Mummy, I haven't yet reached the form in school where girls and boys talk to each other, so when this boy came up to me a second time, I just knew he was trying to pick me up and I felt so embarrassed, I didn't like to answer his question. I said nothing and walked away.' Masha's a good girl," Elena went on. "She always gets fives for her homework." "Out of how many?" I asked. "Five out of five. That's what the best pupils always get and when Masha once had a four she was so upset that she couldn't eat her supper and she cried herself to sleep."

I asked Elena what she did in the evenings after Masha had gone to bed. "I hardly ever go to restaurants," Elena replied. "But tell me, do the people in restaurants dance fox-trots and other 'Western' dances?" "Sometimes," I answered. "I only asked because last night I went to a party where only Russian and other national dances were played and I got very bored as I've never learnt to do them. When I was a young girl before the war, we always danced American dances such as fox-trots and tangos. It's a pity one doesn't still play those tunes at private parties, and I wondered if it were the same in restaurants."

## PENELOPE IN MOSCOW

I explained to Elena that "Western" dances were considered degenerate by the Soviet authorities, but that imitation jazz was played at several of the restaurants I had visited, and that I had frequently been asked to dance by Russians. Elena goggled at me. "But your husband . . . surely he doesn't let you dance with strangers?" "He's not jealous," I replied. "Russian men are very jealous," Elena said proudly. "And Russian women?" I ventured. Elena blushed. "We do not like our husbands to look at other girls when they take us out, it is not 'cultured'."

I have tried to reproduce this conversation as well as I could. Unimportant in itself, it shows how Soviet manners are to-day mid-Victorian rather than "progressive".

One afternoon in early December, the telephone rang in Serge's office. A wrong number—nothing unusual. But Serge went on talking—to a woman, it seemed. When he finally put the receiver down, he said that the woman's name was Vera, and that he was going to meet her at 6-30 at the main post office. I had better come along, too.

We arrived late for the appointment. After we had hunted around for some time, a girl in a black fur coat and a brown hat came up to us and introduced herself as Vera. We took her to "Cocktail Hall." She had a pleasant but not a particularly pretty face and, although her coat was quite well made, she wore a very short dress made of poor material underneath it. She told us that she worked very hard in an engineer's office, but was not very interested in the job. We discussed music. Vera preferred opera to chamber music, and was particularly fond of Tchaikovsky. She was surprised to find that I came from England whereas Serge was French, for she said she did not know that one could marry foreigners. She wanted to know whether Englishmen were handsome, and what French and English women looked like. We asked her to dine with us the following Sunday and she accepted.

We prepared dinner for her in our room. We opened a tin

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

of *foie gras* and one of *confit d'oie* as we were anxious that Vera should receive a favourable impression of Western culture. We put a bottle of Alsatian wine on ice, and waited. The telephone rang. Vera said that she was about to leave home, and would Serge meet her in half an hour outside the hotel? We had warned her about the militiamen at the entrance. But everything went well. Vera duly appeared, and stayed until 12-45 a.m., not an unusually late hour for Moscow.

Vera we thought was an average sort of Moscow girl, neither unusually intelligent nor ambitious. She told us that she was 25, and divorced. She also gave an account of her work. She worked from 7 a.m. until 8 p.m. every day, half the time studying economic planning, and the other half in a ministry. Her earnings were 700 roubles a month, nearly £70 at the official rate, whatever that meant. We asked how she spent her holidays. She replied that she did not care for an organised vacation at a "rest home", but preferred to stay with her brother-in-law in the country, or else just remained in Moscow and had a good time. She did not seem particularly interested in politics. She did ask us why France and England were preparing for war and were so friendly towards the United States, but when we replied that Western propaganda presented things rather differently she did not pursue the subject. I gathered that she accepted the Soviet view on international affairs without thinking much about it and was far more concerned with finding suitable boy-friends. She enjoyed her dinner and seemed interested in our illustrated books on Paris and Versailles. Serge escorted her to her bus when she left.

Another trivial encounter. What is interesting is that we never saw Vera again. She rang us up at intervals and several times promised to dine with us—but she never came. Once she telephoned to tell us that she was on her way and would I go downstairs to meet her, rather than Serge. I waited in the hall for nearly an hour. No sign of Vera. We had taken concert tickets that night, and had invited one of our friends, a Russian-speaking bachelor, to meet her, as she had asked Serge

## PENELOPE IN MOSCOW

during a previous conversation to bring another man because it was not amusing for her to go out with a married couple. She had said that she would like a bachelor. Nationality was unimportant, as long as he spoke Russian.

Several days later she telephoned and explained that on the way to us she had fallen down and laddered her stocking. That was her only excuse. After that we stopped taking Vera's telephone calls or promises to dine with us seriously. Yet, the calls continued for some time. Then they suddenly stopped. Who was Vera? We never even knew her surname or her address. A Cold War acquaintance, that was all.



## Chapter 12

*Stalin's birthday. I view the improbable birthday presents. I attend a women's chess championship, and go skating.*

DECEMBER 21ST, was Stalin's 70th birthday. Moscow was all illuminated and decorated. A *soirée* at the Bolshoi Theatre was attended by Stalin himself, and by such Communist notabilities from abroad as Mao-Tse-Tung and Togliatti. The speeches were followed by a concert. No "imperialist" foreigners were invited: we heard the speeches over the radio. Everyone expressed extreme gratitude to Stalin and intense faith in the ultimate victory of the great Communist movement over everything bourgeois, war-mongering and capitalist.

Some time later I went with Sonia to see the exhibition of Stalin's 70th birthday presents at the Pushkin Museum. To make room, the Old Masters had been thrust out. Stalin was

70 years old on December 21st, but his presents were still being exhibited when we left Moscow in January, and for all I know they are still on show. They were indeed the joy of everyone "up from the country". After the Underground, they ranked as Moscow's proudest possession.

The *pièce de résistance* was a famous carpet painstakingly woven by the grateful people of Azerbaijan which took up the whole of the vast wall at the head of the staircase. Its central portion was taken up by a much larger-than-life image of Stalin standing near one of the Kremlin towers, which he appeared to dwarf. He was surrounded by woven pictures of important events connected with the history of the Communist Party. The colours were very bright. Seventy's appeared in discreet corners everywhere. Had I not seen the whole thing with my own eyes, I would not have believed that such bad taste was possible on such a large scale. But my teacher Sonia found the likeness of Stalin very successful and "just as he really is".

The next ugliest present was a gigantic vase, twice the height of a tall man, made of a new type of glass. We saw presents sent by all the Satellite governments and by Communist Party groups from such countries as Austria, France and Italy. (Nothing, of course, from Yugoslavia.) People had sent Stalin images of himself made of every possible material, from wood to cloth. We did see a few likenesses of Lenin, but many, many fewer. There was Czech and Hungarian furniture, pretty ugly; there were innumerable repellant vases; gadgets of every kind; machinery models from Poland; "Socialist realist" oil paintings; models of houses; heaps of ink-stands; china and glass from Czechoslovakia; embroidery from the Balkan countries and various Soviet republics; toys; dolls wearing different national costumes, and so on. One single present stood out: a beautifully-carved ivory tusk sent by Mao-Tse-Tung. Gifts sent by French Communists were given a whole room to themselves, an honour accorded to no other non-Communist country.



## CHAPTER TWELVE

The year started off cold and frosty. It was soon 33 degrees below zero Réaumur. (The Russians measure by Réaumur.) I walked as little as possible and always wore a scarf over or under my fur hat, taking good care to cover my face, except for my eyes. I released my nose from my fur collar every now and then for breathing purposes. It was better to travel by Underground as the bus windows were coated with a layer of frost and ice an inch thick.

Indoors, Moscow apartments always seemed adequately heated. In our hotel, in other people's flats, in shops, theatres, I suffered less from the cold than in England during the war.

Ice cream continued to be sold in the streets of Moscow all through the winter. Just near the Metropole, a woman vendor stood shouting out the different flavours from the top of a neat pile of frozen snow. "Vanilla, chocolate, coffee or caramel!" Whenever it snowed, the streets would be cleared almost immediately by gangs of hefty female diggers and shovellers who, when necessary, worked all night. I never saw chains used on motor vehicles in or around Moscow.

I held out as long as I could against the papering-up of our windows at the hotel. The maid had been longing to do it for weeks. I had been brought up to believe that lack of fresh air was unhealthy, but changed my mind when we were awakened one morning by what sounded like a gunshot. A bottle of mineral water left on the window sill inside the room had frozen up and burst. After that we had our windows sealed—like everyone else.

Christmas came and went. "I suppose you don't know anybody who would like these Christmas cards?" I asked Mme. Liubov, the elderly Russian dressmaker who sometimes came to alter my clothes. Mme. Liubov blushed at my question, lowered her eyes and then looked me full in the face and confessed that she had particularly admired one of my cards ("The one with Christ and the angels") before I took them down. Could she possibly have it if I could find it? I found it. From any artistic point of view this card was pretty

## PENELOPE IN MOSCOW

atrocious, but Mme. Liubov caressed it with loving eyes, saying shyly: " May I really have it? We used to have cards like this in our country but I never see them now." She carefully wrapped it in some newspaper and thanked me effusively. She was just about to leave with her treasure when she gave a cry of dismay: " This is not a Soviet paper I have used. I can't take the card done up in this; I might be asked questions." I hastily exchanged the piece of *The Times* for a piece of *Pravda* and all was well.

Towards the middle of January we went to see the closing ceremony of the women's international chess championship. Four Soviet Russian women had gained the first places. No one was surprised at this as in no other country is chess so popular among women. Some English, French and German players had won the next places, and received prizes of 2,000 roubles each. The Soviet champion had received a magnificent cup and 10,000 roubles.

After the usual speeches the champion was decorated with a gigantic laurel wreath. She was evidently unaccustomed to public speaking, for she was completely unintelligible. Some one else in a speech described the chess contest as an answer to imperialist war threats. Next, all the competitors thanked their Soviet hosts for their hospitality, with varying degrees of political enthusiasm. Each competitor had had all her expenses paid, and had been put up at the Metropole or similar so-called *de luxe* hotels.

The following evening we attended the farewell reception to the chess players at the Grand Hotel. Invited as guests of the British lady competitor, we found ourselves the only foreigners present, apart from high diplomats. A few women wore evening dress. On arrival, we were shown into the restaurant of the hotel, received by several of the local organisers of the chess tournament, and offered Martinis or pink drinks called " Ladies' cocktails ". It all seemed just as in the " imperialist " world, except that we stood about in fairly well-defined " Eastern " and " Western " groups.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Before supper, a thoroughly bad concert had been arranged for our entertainment. Most people already looked hungry, but there was still a short recital to come. A young man of oratorical talent got up and declaimed first, a poem about love at the age of 38 (why 38?) and then a stirring poem by Maiakovsky, Soviet Russia's major modern poet.

I did not understand much except one section where the Soviet regime was extolled as the regime under which everything belongs to the people—the shops, the cars, the police and so on. These were familiar words to me. The recital seemed more successful than the concert. It was followed by an excellent buffet supper. Food and drink were attacked with enormous enthusiasm. There was caviare, smoked salmon, ham, salads, *pirozinki* (Russian pastries filled with egg and rice or meat), cold sucking pig, fruit, cakes, etc. The atmosphere was really friendly and, after plenty of vodka had been drunk, "East" actually began to mingle with "West".

The weather continued cold, and Serge and I decided to investigate the "Park of Culture and Rest" (otherwise known as Gorky Park) skating rink. I wore trousers and three jumpers and hoped for the best. I had not been to "Gorky Park" since the summer. Now everything was white, the paths had been flooded and frozen, and thus linked the various skating rinks with each other. One rink was for beginners only; one for children only and one for figure skating only.

To hire skates, I stood with Serge in three successive queues—I cannot remember why. At the end Serge was given wrong sized boots and had to queue again to get them changed. Immediately underneath a huge NO SMOKING sign stood a policeman with a lighted cigarette between his lips telling other people to put theirs out. By the time we were ready to skate we felt exhausted, yet soon forgot our troubles in the keen, crisp air, gliding from one rink to another. It was impossible to feel the cold, even though there was no sun and vodka was not sold in the park.



## Chapter 13

*Food becomes cheaper. Stalin is re-elected. We dine with Sonia. Domestic worries of my friends.*

AT the beginning of 1915 there were substantial price cuts. On March 1st I tried to see whether cheese was cheaper, but once again could not get near any counter in any *gastronom*. Still, we thought we noticed more people ordering wine with their restaurant meals. Vodka cost less, too. One day I told Sonia, my teacher, that chocolate was still sufficiently dear to be regarded as a luxury. I received the usual answer. "No one minds that," Sonia assured me. "The Soviet people all much prefer potatoes and cabbages which are now quite inexpensive!"

The foreign "colony" in Moscow did not profit for, coupled with the price drop, the diplomatic exchange rate for the rouble was abolished. The revalued rate of exchange bore little relation to actual purchasing power (11 roubles to the

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

pound, upon which purely artificial basis I have made all calculations in this book).

By this time I knew enough Russian to make my own calculations while shopping without asking for help from the usual man or woman counting beads on an abacus. One afternoon at a big *gastronom* a short-sighted old lady asked me if I could tell her the price marked on the cheese. Noting my foreign accent, she asked if I were German—always the first guess. I said I was not German. “Do you speak French?” my old lady then inquired, and was delighted to find that I did. She herself spoke excellent French, but said that she had had no opportunity of practice for many years. While her husband had been alive, they had often talked French together. She ushered me into a corner where we could talk fairly unobserved, and asked questions about my life in Moscow, just in order to hear French spoken again. I wished I had a better French accent, but the old lady seemed satisfied. She was telling me that she was a school teacher when almost in the middle of a sentence she abruptly shook my hand, thanked me and disappeared. I felt very touched and a little sad.

March 12th was a Sunday and election day throughout the USSR. It had been rumoured that Stalin himself would make an election speech. This, however, did not happen. The sun shone on all the happy voters, who were granted a public holiday for the occasion. To ensure proper secrecy, the voter could go behind a curtain at the polling booth so that no one could possibly see him mark his cross against the only candidate's name which appeared on his ballot paper. He was also permitted to return his voting paper without a cross. Nobody was surprised when Stalin was returned to office with 30,000 more votes than the number of residents in his district. We were told that it was considered such an honour to vote for Stalin that some people cheated, voting twice, once for the candidate in their own district and once for Stalin in his. All day, with intervals of music, Moscow radio stations broadcast

## PENELOPE IN MOSCOW

descriptions of the polling. In far-off Azerbaijan a man of 140 had gone to register his vote, accompanied by his wife aged 120 and their daughter aged 100.

In the evening we went to see an open-air show which was staged in a huge square near our hotel. A banner bearing the inscription "Glory to the Great Stalin" floated overhead. There were crowds of people, not in the least perturbed by the raging snowstorm. Everyone just stood quietly watching the folk dancing and fencing, all the time getting whiter and whiter.

A record number of posters and banners glorifying Stalin adorned Moscow that night.

On April 3rd, we realised that we had already been in Moscow for exactly a year. I celebrated by having our windows unsealed. The maids told me that in time they would also be cleaned. Spring had not really begun. The trees were still obstinately bare, and only artificial lilac and roses were sold at the open air flower stalls. The winter had been depressingly long.

By the middle of April the weather grew warmer—that is, I could go out in a light fur coat. It was, however, impossible to find anywhere to sit in the open air, as all Moscow gardens were closed in preparation for May 1st. One morning I rang up Elena and we arranged to go for a walk during her lunch hour. We went through the Red Square, crossed a bridge and strolled along the river. On the other side, the Kremlin sparkled magnificently in the sunshine. "Have you anything like that in your country?" Elena asked me. "You'd see as beautiful buildings in England and France," I said, "But nothing resembles the Kremlin; our architecture is quite different. I love the Kremlin because it is gorgeous and oriental." "I love it because it's so Russian," Elena said thoughtfully, "because it is beautiful in our own Russian way." We walked in silence for a few minutes. Then Elena began to speak of the recent war. "What I don't understand," she said, "is the hatred felt

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

by some European peoples towards the Germans, even now. Of course, the Nazis behaved atrociously towards my people when they invaded the country, but even at that time we did not hate the German people. For instance, I once had to pass through a village, completely destroyed by the Nazis. I stopped to watch a line of German prisoners being marched through all the wreckage they had caused. I was surrounded by Soviet women who had nearly all lost a son, a sweetheart, a husband or someone close to them. These women did not look at the German prisoners with hatred; they looked at them with pity, saying to each other: 'Poor lads, they were forced to do it all by Hitler,' and they gave them a part of their bread ration."

This I reflected was a most interesting revelation of an unexpected aspect of the Russian character. Then I switched the conversation on to a lighter vein.

"By the way, I dreamt about Stalin last night, for the second time recently."

Elena smiled. "You were there too, in my dream," I went on, "Stalin had lunch with your boss and his wife and you and Serge and me. After lunch, Stalin's car failed to turn up, so, as we'd been lent one for the occasion, I offered him a lift. I remember quite distinctly whispering to you all: 'I hope you don't mind if we drop the Generalissimo at the Kremlin first?' You know, Elena, in both my dreams about Stalin, he was absolutely charming." Even as I said all this, I thought it sounded silly—which it did—and was unprepared for Elena's utterly serious reaction. "When I dream about Stalin," she said, "I get a wonderful 'warm' feeling and I wake up so happy. It's exactly like talking to mother." I did not know what to say. Elena, suddenly realising that she had been addressing an unbeliever, blushed and quickly changed the subject.

One evening we found ourselves with two extra tickets for a ballet called *Crimson Sails* and gave them to my Russian teacher, Sonia, and a woman friend of hers. Sonia walked

## PENELOPE IN MOSCOW

with us to the Bolshoi Theatre, but explained that her friend would be meeting her there, and could not come and have a drink with us first. During the interval, Sonia walked up and down the hall with us. Her friend stayed in her seat. After the ballet we asked them both to dine with us at the hotel café. Sonia came, but her friend went straight home.

During dinner, a tall, swarthy, unshaven Georgian came up to our table and asked me to dance. A few weeks previously, in the same café, he had come and asked Serge for a French cigarette. He was only slightly drunk. He kept on asking me my nationality and insisted that my husband was either English or Canadian. He told me that he taught in a technical school for youths from 18 to 22, and that he earned 2,800 roubles (about £255), which sounded like a handsome salary per week to me, but of course it was only per month. He then asked me how much money Serge was paid for his work. I was able to answer quite truthfully that I had not the faintest idea. The next question aroused my suspicions. He pointed to Sonia and inquired if she were Russian. When I said "Yes," he wanted to know if she were our guide. I wondered if he had been planted on us, but of course never found out. At any rate, he attached himself to us for the remainder of the evening. "I like the French people so much," he told Serge, "they were such wonderful soldiers in the 1914 war. In this last war they naturally had no stomach for fighting; it was all a misunderstanding; the French didn't want to fight the Germans at all; they wanted to fight the Russians." Serge remarked that he thought the French had had their hands quite full enough without wanting to add the Red Army to their burdens, but the Georgian insisted, saying that surely it was a most unfriendly act on the part of France towards the USSR to have sent both airmen and equipment to Finland in 1939. Serge said that no airmen had been sent. The argument continued until we all went home. "That was not a very nice Georgian," I commented to Serge. We concluded that he had in fact been less drunk than he pretended. Sonia had not been



## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

perturbed, however. As an official teacher of Russian to foreigners, she could always accompany us on a recognised professional basis.

By this time we had become very fond of her and were pleased when for the first time *she* asked *us* to dinner. Her fourth floor room in an old block of flats was quite spacious, and simply but pleasantly furnished. There was a divan, a piano, two cupboards, several upright chairs and a biggish table. The two windows were large and the new curtains were spotless. There were no other curtains and no carpet. The centre lamp hung low from the ceiling and gave a very good light. Sonia shared a bathroom, other offices and kitchen with her neighbours. Heating and cooking were done by gas. The room comfortable, and beautifully kept.

Dinner—once again—was more like a banquet. The table was set with pretty glass and china and dishes of varied *bors d'œuvres*: sausage, caviare, smoked salmon, ham, sprats and cheese, to be washed down with vodka and white wine. Next, Sonia produced a gigantic pilaff; tinned apples followed, served with mixed biscuits, chocolate and cake. The meringue biscuits were home made. Finally there was tea. We sat and talked guardedly about politics—Sonia's views faithfully reflected those of *Pravda*—and more freely about music. The evening passed pleasantly enough.

A few days later some friends of ours were moving away from a hotel into a flat, and I went to give them a hand. I found them raging against *Burobin*\* just as I habitually raged against *Intourist*. "Look at this dreadful furniture we have had to hire temporarily," the wife exclaimed as we examined the new apartment. I looked on and murmured sympathy. "And do you know what?" she went on indignantly, "all the floors were washed before the furniture was moved in. Now they are filthy again and *Burobin* tells us that they will have to be washed again at our own expense. They have asked us for a huge sum per square metre of floor and they charge even more

---

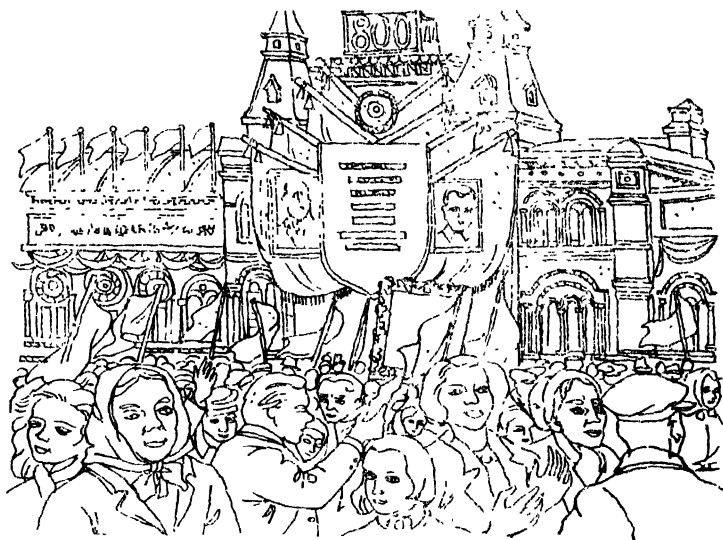
\* The Soviet agency dealing with the requirements of diplomats.

## PENELOPE IN MOSCOW

for waxing the boards. Then the windows have just been repainted, but the inside ones don't open at all, so in the summer they have to be removed completely, spoiling all the new paint. And that's not all. Do you see that groove outside the windows?" I said I did, and that at the moment it looked ice-bound. "That's just it," I was told. "The ice collects there during the winter and the whole thing swells. Oh dear, oh dear!" My friend sighed hopelessly and went on to tell me about another acquaintance who had sent for workmen to remove the snow from her roof, knowing that if it were left to lie there, the roof would soon leak. The workmen absolutely refused to come, saying, "Why are you worrying us now? Wait till the roof does leak—we will come then!"

Minor domestic worries. But they are the sort of thing that occupies a large part of a foreigner's life in Moscow.

My distracted friend found time to tell me the following anecdote—one of the latest current jokes. An old Russian was walking down the street, cursing at the top of his voice. He created such a disturbance that a policeman took him to the police station. He was shown into a small room, and a stern-looking personage asked him whom he had been cursing in that abominable manner. "Truman, of course," replied the Russian promptly. The police officer's face relaxed. "That's all right, you can go." The old Russian left the room, but once outside, he hesitated, pushed the door open again and poked his head through to inquire: "And who did *you think* I was swearing at?"



## Chapter 14

*I go to the Soviet theatre and to a Soviet "Western" movie. Spring comes. My second May Day in Moscow—less novel than the first.*

ONCE asked a Russian woman why there were no modern psychological plays in the Soviet Union—good old father or mother-complex dramas for instance. She replied: "Such conflicts as those shown on the stage in western countries do not exist here. I personally do not have conflicts."

Try again: I then said that I thought it a pity that there were no new satirical plays in the Gogol tradition. "That was in Tsarist times. Nowadays there are no longer injustices and I find that it leaves a nasty taste in the mouth to hear our country made fun of. It is unhealthy and unpatriotic." I had no more to say. Most Soviet plays I saw pointed their moral as directly as any Victorian cautionary tale.

*Ilya Golovin*, for instance, dealt with the story of the well-

## PENELOPE IN MOSCOW

known Russian composer, Shostakovitch, and his musical "reform". Suitable music was composed especially for the play by Khatchaturian, another famous contemporary composer, but the disguise fooled nobody. The curtain went up on a scene taking place at Golovin's country "dacha". One sees Golovin, the composer, at home with his second wife and his son and daughter by his first marriage. Golovin is at this time busy writing the "wrong" sort of music. This bourgeois error naturally affects his whole attitude towards life. He shows no consideration for his wife, and refuses to appear at a pioneers' meeting: right from the start, one realises that Golovin is a bad Communist!

His son is an artist. On this point also nothing is left to the imagination. The "dacha" on the stage is full of the most frightful-looking landscape paintings. An industrialist friend of the family gives Golovin junior a piece of his mind: "Now young fellow, you should serve the people, you know, and paint collective farms instead of poppies." One realises from this remark that the industrialist can be classified as a good Communist. When Golovin's daughter says that she is worried over her father's latest musical phase, as she finds his new fourth symphony "so unmelodious," one can with certainty place her, too, amongst the good Communists. Everything is thus made perfectly clear to the audience right from the start.

The Golovin family is peacefully breakfasting one morning when *Pravda* is brought in by the maid. Consternation: for *Pravda* carries a violent attack on Golovin's fourth symphony, calling it foreign-inspired, formalistic and useless. The effect of this article is instantaneous. Golovin's wife, son and daughter retire discreetly. A music critic who had been asked to stay the night rushes out into the pelting rain to catch an early train back to Moscow to enable him—as is made quite plain—to rewrite his review in accordance with *Pravda's* new opinion.

Golovin is left all alone. He remains at the "dacha" all

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

through the winter with the faithful maid as his only companion. His family has deserted him—this is considered quite proper in the interest of "the cause". The composer is through with composing and gives himself up to meditation. When he hears his fourth symphony broadcast by the "Voice of America", he begins to realise how mistaken he was to have written such "cacophonous" music. I was very interested in the audience's reaction to this stage broadcast: they laughed derisively upon hearing such unfamiliar, "unmelodious" music.

Next, Golovin's son and daughter and his industrialist friend return to visit him. At the same time a General arrives with ten of his men, asking for a billet for the night. The Soviet General is the person who manages to set Golovin on the right path again. "Look here, old boy," he says to him (or words to that effect), "you were once the idol of our people. We loved your earlier works. Then you went all formalist and incomprehensible and now we are waiting for you to compose for us again. We want you back as you used to be. Did you know that one of your early compositions was turned into a Red Army song, and many's the time that your tune has inspired our lads to victory on the battlefield? We want music everyone can hum. Your people need you; the Red Army needs you; it's your duty to work for us. Your music could do so much for the cause . . ."

The good General's logic convinces Golovin. Then and there he starts work on a new piano concerto along the lines the General has suggested. He is received back into favour amid general rejoicings. He is now a changed man. Henceforth he will put his music at the service of his people, the great Soviet people whom, he has come to realise, he loves so deeply. One of his first "post-reformation" gestures is a free concert for the pioneers he had previously snubbed. When the "reformed" piano concerto was played on the stage, the audience applauded heartily. I am sure the majority were in complete agreement with the theme of the play.

## PENELOPE IN MOSCOW

A play called *Moscow Character* dealt with a man who over-fulfilled his factory's plan by 134 per cent, and as a consequence became swollen-headed. His wife worked in a textile factory. His own job was in heavy industry and he started to refuse to allow his factory to manufacture the things his wife's factory needed. This was very bad and when he got into trouble his wife, as a loyal Soviet citizen, sided against him. He eventually confessed his error and all was well. The moral of the play was that light industry should not be neglected. Not long after Serge had seen the play, however, he saw a criticism in the press to the effect that it gave too much importance to light industry! Playwrights need to be careful to keep abreast of new lines of government policy.

In *The Foreign Shadow*, a play by Simonov, one of the USSR's richest and most successful playwrights, a Soviet professor of medicine makes an important discovery concerning plague microbes. He believes that science should be universal and not national and accordingly passes on his discovery to the Americans. Then his family and colleagues spend some time in explaining to him that science, alas! can no longer be considered international, since the wicked West uses every new medical discovery for destructive purposes. The professor finally understands his error and is forgiven. The real "traitor"—the paid agent who had persuaded the innocent professor to send his discovery to America—commits suicide when unmasked and all's well that ends well.

Curtain.

When we went to see a colour film called *Kuban Cossacks*, we arrived late and found a crowd of other latecomers beating despairingly on a glass door. Serge went to find the manager and we and our two friends were immediately shown to our seats, the Soviet occupants of which were removed. The film reminded me of a Hollywood Western with the members of rival collective farms in the place of cowboys. The colour was better than the sound; there were no screen kisses, but there was plenty of romantic love. Of the two heroines, the

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

manageress of collective farm A looked like an aristocratic White Russian *émigrée*, and the girl from farm B looked far too dainty for her job, but both were imbued with the correct collective spirit, and they each ended by marrying a man from the other farm. A scene at a fair showed us close-ups of wonderful modern radio sets and bicycles which I had never seen exhibited in any of the Moscow shops. When the junior hero won his horse race, the cinema audience clapped wildly. *Kuban Cossacks* soon drew queues as long as those for *The Fall of Berlin*.

This year the public gardens were opened before May 1st. On the first warm day I took my Russian grammar to a small garden square in front of our hotel. It soon became my favourite haunt, for it was conveniently near the hotel and, until late afternoon, fairly empty.

On the very first day, a polite young man started a conversation with me. He had become a university student again after five years in the army. During this period he had been in Warsaw, and had also spent three years in Germany. He expressed an admiration for Dresden but added immediately that of course Paris was the capital of capitals. He had not been there. London, he had heard, was rather a sombre city. I praised Leningrad but he dismissed it summarily with a wave of the hand. We both agreed that the centre of Moscow was beautiful, but that the rest was very debatable.

I had two copies of *The Listener* with me and showed my companion the illustrations. I tried to pretend that I had not noticed the picture of Marshal Tito reviewing troops and turned over the page hurriedly, but my companion made me turn it back again so that he could have a proper look! "Very interesting," was his only comment. Of the illustrations concerning England, he showed great interest in Hampstead Garden Suburb which impressed him favourably. Then he was quite fascinated by a picture of Norwich, for the shape of the roofs was unlike anything he had ever seen. Most of all,

however, he enjoyed a photograph of the Queen and Princess Elizabeth. We both got up from our bench at the same time, and he bade me a hurried good-bye right in front of the policeman stationed outside the Hotel Metropole. I was pleased with this adventure.

The same day Serge and I had a brief conversation with a Soviet officer during lunch at a second-class restaurant. "I've been to Paris," he said. "Well, it's not such a bad place really—you know, a little Moscow, or perhaps even a big Bucharest. Anyway I liked it better than New York. That was a dreadful place—no one spoke Russian." Serge asked him what he made of the international situation. "Another war is as inevitable as rain," he replied cheerfully. "For the capitalist countries need to make war to try and solve their own contradictions."

May 1st, —our second May Day in Moscow—dawned sunny and bright. I noticed that the slogans laid greater stress on foreign Communist affairs than the previous year. Also, the common people said to be "struggling for peace" in Britain and America were greeted in enthusiastic slogans by their Soviet brothers.

I managed to make out more of the May Day speeches than I did in 1911. They had a distinct flavour of "we don't want to fight, but by jingo if we do . . ." Both the Soviet Union's profound love for peace and her efficient preparedness to resist aggression were equally stressed. The military parade was the same as before, plus a new jet model. (The censor refused to pass a passage in Serge's dispatch mentioning this model.) The civilian procession was led by a large group of youthful pioneers and a children's band. The girl pioneers wore white blouses and black skirts, red kerchiefs at the neck and red ribbons to tie up their plaits. The boys all had shaven heads and wore white shirts and black trousers and, naturally, the red kerchiefs which distinguish pioneers from ordinary children. Stalin was presented with a bouquet of flowers by a little girl. Flowers were carried by a number of the children and also by



## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

the adults who followed later. Banners displaying pictures of Communist leaders included Britain's own Harry Pollitt.

In the evening we mixed with the crowd of merry-makers and listened to the raucous music blaring from the loudspeakers. There were the usual fireworks at 10 p.m. In addition, floating aloft, there was an illuminated portrait of Stalin, who benevolently watched over us all from his position high in the night sky. Balloons were the secret of this miracle, whose effect was startling. While we craned our necks, three young revellers came up behind me, one of whom asked me in Russian for a cigarette. I turned round and was greeted by a disillusioned wail: "You're old; I thought you were young!" To wind up our evening, we drove in a friend's car to the top of a hill on the outskirts of the town for a view of the illuminations. My second May Day in Moscow, and destined to be my last.

## Chapter 15

*I note an improvement in Soviet summer clothes. Sonia and I go bathing. We actually succeed in leaving for our summer holiday in the South.*

By the time we had been in Moscow over a year we began to notice a definite improvement in people's dress. No longer, as in 1949, could one immediately tell a Soviet woman from a foreigner. Shoes particularly had progressed and it was rarer to see the shabby slippers many women wore during our first Russian spring and summer. The new footwear consisted of substantial-looking Czech shoes, and occasionally one saw white sandals. I was once stopped in the street by a woman carrying the string bag all Russian shoppers have: "Excuse me, but can you tell me where you bought your white shoes?" She was heartbroken when I replied, "In London."

Coats and dresses, too, were on the up-grade. There were plenty of new bright-coloured clothes about and quite a few young women even wore nylons. I was told that a pair of Soviet nylon stockings cost 30 roubles (getting on for £3). They looked heavier than most of the nylons one sees in the West and also shinier. At the same time the "new look" began to sweep Moscow in a big way—a case of better late than never.

By July, I had three new dresses which were made from my own material by two *Intourist* dressmakers at the National Hotel. I had decided to fall back on *Intourist* after a series of rebuffs from other quarters. I had first tried my luck at several Soviet dress shops ("ateliers"), despite the forbidding appearance of the models displayed. "We can't take you until July, but come back any day after June 15th," I had been told by atelier No. 1 at the beginning of June. I knew that this meant queuing steadily every morning between June 15th and

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

July 1st on the off chance of getting taken on, so that was no good. At atelier No. 2 I was told "taking no more orders but come back next week and see." At No. 3 I was simply told: "No hope at all—full up."

I returned to No. 2 the following week. The woman I had spoken to on my first visit was not there and the one who was there swore that I had never been into the shop before. I was with a Russian-speaking friend who asked to see the director. The latter—a woman—eyed me distastefully with the sort of expression that one might expect a Soviet woman to assume after reading a *Pravda* article about the Anglo-Americans. "Why don't you get *Intourist* to help you?" she snarled. So there was nothing for it but to apply to *Intourist* which, for once, was helpful. I could not have the same dressmaker for all the orders, and I had myself to provide all etceteras, such as zips, bones, hooks and weights. For weights I got pellets at a gun shop; the bones I had to have sent from London; the hooks I had with me, and in the end I had to give up the idea of zips as the Soviet ones were too clumsy and too short and I could not get hold of any others just then. Luckily I did get hold of some French and American fashion magazines. I was pleased with my dresses and after my last fitting, one of the few which took place at the time and on the day previously arranged, I presented one of the fitters with the latest French *Jardin des Modes*. She was so thrilled that she flung her arms round my neck and kissed me!

All this time our "social" life continued on its strenuous round. The Israeli Legation was one of the rare oases where East and West could meet. I remember a luncheon party where I found myself seated opposite a Czech, a Pole and an Albanian. None of them actually spoke to me during the meal but at least I was able to look at them! After lunch I relaxed on a sofa with a Finnish and a Czech wife with whom I had a lively discussion about children, holidays and interior decoration. "How did you enjoy yourself?" Serge asked me afterwards. "Very much," I replied, "I think that was the

first East and West party I have been to where the general conversation was not exclusively concerned with political polemics; it was a great relief! Since lunch I realise that Czech ideas regarding furnishing and decorating a home are after all very similar to our own, and the Polish Colonel's opinion of Picasso coincides exactly with that held by most British colonels! "

However, I realised how deep the gulf really was when I saw such Soviet magazines as *Ogoniok*. This was an illustrated review. One number was especially devoted to children and young people. These were shown living happily and bursting with health in the earthly paradises of the USSR and the "People's Democracies", whereas in Glasgow they were shown to be poorly dressed and reduced to playing on vacant bomb sites. *Ogoniok* did not mention the bombing, but explained that the spaces were vacant because of the slow and unchecked disintegration of capitalist houses. The photographs of Glasgow singularly resembled certain parts of Moscow I had seen. But of course no foreign photographer is ever allowed to take pictures of a Moscow slum. Hence, for the faithful Communists abroad, they don't exist.

We were pleased when a new Armenian restaurant called "Ararat" opened. It had an adjoining cafe, different from any other Moscow cafe. We sensed a new atmosphere as soon as we saw the bamboo curtain. (Later on I found less and less of this curtain each time I went to the cafe: parts had been torn off by heavy drunks on their unsteady way out.)

The cafe was light and airy, and was divided into two parts. One half of the tables was on a raised dais, suitable for intimate parties as there were sofas lining the walls, which in turn were decorated with colourful frescoes of Armenian scenery. Music was supplied by a raucous gramophone. I found the Armenian folk tunes doleful and difficult to understand, but perhaps they sounded better in Armenia. The waitresses wore dark saxe-blue cotton dresses almost reaching to their ankles, pale green aprons and headdresses very similar

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

to those worn by nuns. They were all quite young, and served briskly. We really were in another world! The specialities of the place were excellent salmon trout and an Armentan version of Cornish pasties, cooked in oil. Even the Turkish coffee was filled with smaller grounds than the average Soviet cupful.

One Sunday we went again to our friends' "dacha" in the country. The Popular Democrats next door were being very noisy and merry, doing acrobatics and playing volleyball and accordions in their garden. I thought I recognised a few "bourgeois" dance tunes, but perhaps I was mistaken. The slender wooden fence separating the two lungalows looked frail, yet the separation was complete. Going for a walk, we passed groups of Russians proudly parading in their Sunday best—striped pyjamas. There was more accordion playing, more laughter, and then the peace of the birch forest, glittering silver in the sunshine. We bought some strawberries and the woman who sold them to us appeared extremely surprised that we did not try to cheat her. We took a train back before dinner time. As it chugged along through the dusty Moscow suburbs, I wondered who lived—and how—in the rows of wooden shacks we passed. Moscow's suburbs, although pretty grim, are fortunately not very extensive. One can soon reach real country.

On another fine day, Sonia and I went swimming at a beach known as "Silver Pine Forest". We left the hotel with our bathing costumes, towels and a picnic lunch. First we took the Underground, and then the wrong bus. That was a pity, for we had actually managed to find seats. We were not so lucky on the correct bus which was small and overcrowded. I kept on hoping, each time I barked my shins against a sack of milk containers that I couldn't get away from, that at the next stop at least one person would get out. Only fresh passengers got in and my legs became more and more bruised. I thought nostalgically of the "only five standing" rule in London.

Silver Pine Forest turned out to be a river beach, flanked by pinewoods full of "dachas". There was real sand, and people

were dressing and undressing in the open without any fuss at all, so we did the same. Sonia had a new red-and-white striped bathing dress. A lot of women went into the water in their underclothes (vests and bloomers); a few wore costumes which must have dated from the early days of the Soviet régime, one or two actually had two-piece sets, but the pieces never matched; children under six wore their birthday suits; from 6 to 13 or 14 neither boys nor girls wore tops; slightly older girls veiled their breasts with woollen vests.

I noticed that most of the older women were on an enormous scale, whereas a large number of the young girls were very slender. Why? Everyone was having a whale of a time. The smaller children indulged in splashing matches; boys wrestled and ragged together; some bathers swam; others floated; mothers sitting on the beach called in their young from time to time. It seemed that with their clothes all the bathers had cast off their cares; the sky was cloudless; the sun warm and the breeze refreshing. After we had eaten our sandwiches, Sonia started to read while I fell asleep. Between two baths we sucked ices and before taking the return bus we dressed and found a beach inland on which to spread our wet things, and while they dried in the sun we opened the grammar book for the first time. Sonia asked me if Serge found his work in Moscow difficult. I said that he did not find it easy because of the censor. Sonia looked puzzled and inquired, "What is that?" Perhaps she really did not know.

The queue for the return bus was enormous but somehow we got pushed in. Just as it was about to start, it was boarded by half a dozen dirty urchins of the pick-pocket variety. The muscular conductress shoved them off a couple of stops further on, with the passengers' vocal and moral support. Before returning home I went round to Sonia's room to have some coffee, bread and butter and blackcurrant jam. I was never able to resist Russian jams which retain the actual flavour of the fruit better than any others I know. Sonia showed me her photograph albums. There was one picture of

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

her sister on her honeymoon before the war at Yalta. She and her husband had gone there in an organised group of twenty to thirty people. Hardly our idea of a honeymoon.

During the warm spell I often repaired to the garden square just outside our hotel, as days in the country were rare. I was fairly frequently approached by friendly Soviet males, but "picking up" never went beyond the preliminary courtesies—at least as far as I was concerned. One day I was sitting writing a letter, completely absorbed in my literary struggle, when a girl's trenchant voice cut across my concentration. I had not supposed that the first "devushka!" (girl) I heard was addressed to me, but when it was repeated I looked up. "Girl, pull your dress down," a 16 or 17-year-old militant young Soviet woman called out authoritatively. I noticed then that my dress had ridden up to knee level under my writing pad. I obediently readjusted it and thanked my aggressive informant. She did not even smile.

One of my pick-ups was female, dark, rather ugly and of uncertain age. She was wearing an old dark-brown overcoat made of very inferior cloth, and a rather dirty pink cotton dress underneath. She came and sat beside me one morning as I was reading *The Times*, and immediately started talking as if we were old friends. At first I thought she said that she was German, but I soon discovered that she had said Georgian. She was merely studying German.

She had a very peculiar accent in Russian. She asked me where I came from and what I was doing in Moscow. She seemed disappointed when I said that my husband did not write for *Humanité*. All at once, with tremendous enthusiasm, she jumped up, exclaiming: "Come with me and see Lenin—I have not yet been to the mausoleum." I said I had been but she did not consider that a sufficient excuse for not going again. I tried to explain that I had to meet my husband for lunch in a quarter of an hour, but as she went on insisting, I said that I would walk with her as far as the Red Square. There we

found a huge queue of people already standing outside the mausoleum which, we discovered, was not due to open for another hour and a half.

As I could not wait, we walked back together. My companion told me that she was called Génia and that she came from Tiflis (Tbilissi, as it is now officially known). I said that we wanted to go there for our summer holiday. "I hope you will meet my comrade Pavlov; I have forgotten his address," Génia remarked. I could not think of anything further to say about Pavlov in that case, so I fell back on Stalin. "Stalin comes from Georgia," I ventured. "Yes, yes," Génia exclaimed excitedly, "and you know we are all Stalin's children." "Of course," I smiled, "He is the father of the whole Soviet people." "Have you ever seen him?" I was then asked. I said I had, on May 1st, 1909, on May 1st, 1910 and also on Aviation Day. (There was no air display in owing to bad weather.) "Were you close to him?" By this time Génia was practically jumping up and down with excitement. "Not very." "Oh." Her voice betrayed disappointment, but she went on, almost as enthusiastically: "Have you ever seen Bevin?" "No." (I really could not remember but did not like to confess that!) "Attlee?" "No." "Thorez?"—here her voice dropped to a reverential whisper. "No." "Have you signed the Stockholm Peace Petition?" "No," I replied. "Why not?" That was far too complicated for me to explain in my elementary Russian, but luckily Génia did not press the point. "I want you to promise me that all the same you will fight for peace," she begged, "even in England." I tried to make her understand that no one in England wanted war, but she obviously did not believe me.

We walked in silence for a minute or two and then Génia abruptly turned to me and said: "You see, I have very poor clothes, haven't I?" I was still struggling to find a suitable diplomatic reply to this when she asked me: "I am not pretty, am I?" My embarrassment grew. "You have lovely vivacious



## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

dark eyes," I tried lamely. Génia did not appear satisfied. "And nice hair," I added, swallowing hard, for the hair was dirty, dead and untidy. Génia was still staring at me entreatingly. "So you see, you really are pretty," I concluded. That she flatly refused to believe, so I gave up. By then we had almost got back to the Metropole. Before saying good-bye, Génia gave me her telephone number but did not tell me either her father's name (the knowledge of which is essential if you want to address a Russian politely) or her surname. I never rang her up.

Next, there came the Korean war. I do not think that the Soviet people reacted nearly as strongly to the start of the war in Korea as when US aircraft flew over Soviet territory not long previously. Korea, after all, was far away. A Russian girl we knew told us that she was on holiday in Riga when the invasion took place. We asked her what people's reactions were. She replied: "At first there was considerable panic as somehow most people had misunderstood the news and believed that our allies, the North Koreans, had attacked the South. In that case, we naturally all feared that the Soviet Union would have to support them. However, once we realised, from listening more carefully to the wireless, that it was the South Koreans who were the aggressors, we knew that everything would be all right and that the Soviet Union would not be involved."

Elena, however, became very worried when she saw a copy of *Life* magazine which printed pictures of what New York would look like after a Russian bombardment, showing the "enemy" in the act of dropping an atom bomb. "Do the British illustrated papers also contain such horrible things?" she asked me. I assured her that they did not, London having already been bombed by the Germans. "We only want peace," said Elena, "We know what war is like; how can the Americans imagine that we are going to attack them?" I cannot remember how I replied, but I do clearly remember the indignant expression on Elena's face.

## PENELOPE IN MOSCOW

July was altogether an eventful month. The Hotel Metropole telephone system was put on the dial. Before July, 1950, the procedure of telephoning was the following: to make an outside call, you picked up the receiver and, after waiting some time for one of the hotel telephonists to answer, you asked for "town." Usually nothing happened, so you twiddled and banged, gently or vigorously, according to your mood. When the telephonist finally took some notice, you politely asked her for "town" again. There was no point in adding that you had already asked once before, for it was probably a different telephonist by this time. If "town" was busy (which it frequently was) you started all over again after a decent interval. If "town" was not engaged but just would not answer, you also started all over again. If, on the other hand, "town" did answer, you asked for your number. The girl would then repeat after you a quite different number, and unless you were very quick in correcting her, you would get the wrong number and have to begin again. If you were given the right number you might well be cut off in the middle of the most important part of your conversation, in which case you would still have to begin again. The average time for one telephone call was roughly forty minutes.

The introduction of the dial reduced this time by about half. The operation started the same way as before; you lifted the receiver and asked the telephonist for "town". Then, instead of waiting for "town" to reply, you heard a low mellow hum and could dial your number yourself. There was a snag, though; if, instead of the hum you heard a lot of "pip, pip, pips" in quick succession, you had to get hold of the telephonist and ask for "town" again. The "pip, pip, pips" were frequent.

By the middle of August Sonia was back from a month's holiday in a "rest home" at Gagri, on the Black Sea coast of the Caucasus. She had had a wonderful time, and would have liked to stay longer. However, she looked sunburnt and rested.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

I asked what the food was like and she said that meat was served three times a day. She had been on a great many motor excursions to surrounding beauty spots and was altogether thrilled with her Caucasian vacation. I had news for her, too. We had asked *Intourist* for a permit to go to Tiflis on August 25th, but we were still waiting for the authorisation.

By August 25th we were already packed and we had our train reservations booked for that afternoon. We were only waiting for our papers to be stamped with the necessary permit to travel to Tiflis. Our papers were still in the hands of the militia. There was a vital letter missing in the chain of formalities to be complied with before we could leave Moscow. The militia blamed *Intourist*. *Intourist* blamed the authority who should have written the letter. The authority in question, whom we finally managed to contact, pretended that he knew nothing about the need for this letter. We knew he was lying, but all we could do was to beg him to dispatch the letter *without any further delay*. He said he would send it off immediately. We guessed that as far as "immediately" went, he was lying again. Official promises in the Soviet Union are never broken by the exact person who makes them . . . We did not leave Moscow on August 25th. I felt furious and frustrated although after one year, four months and twenty-two days in the USSR, I should have learnt better. There was no question of our not getting to Tiflis eventually, but I still remained sufficiently Western to be angry when it wasn't on the day I had arranged to go. On top of all this, the lock of our door went wrong again. It was usually mended regularly once a week, but this time it was done so efficiently that once we had shut the door behind us, it was quite impossible to re-open. I went and complained and was told that it would be put right the next day. I exploded and shouted that I wanted it put right *to-day* and not *to-morrow*. The group of maids I was addressing roared with laughter at my strange request. This was one of the days when I felt defeated by Russia.

We were still in Moscow on August 29th. "The letter"

entailed more complications than I had imagined. The authority I thought responsible had to refer to about three higher authorities, so I decided to go to the militia myself, although this was really *Intourist's* job. After being kept waiting for an hour and a half, I was at last handed our papers and passports, all in order. I rushed back to the hotel to ask *Intourist* to get us train tickets for that same afternoon. There were no tickets to be had for that day or the next, 1st, 2nd, or 3rd class. The day after was doubtful, too. We took air tickets for Monday, September 4th. They cost us 600 roubles a head and there was going to be a great deal to pay on our overweight luggage, for I knew that we had more than the allowance of 10 kilos each. But never mind (" nichevo ") WE WERE GOING TO TIFLIS . . . We had already said " good-bye " to our friends so many times since August 25th that we knew that they wouldn't believe us if we said good-bye again! I myself did not really believe that we were leaving until *Intourist* told us how much we owed them for excess luggage! It was an astronomical sum and we discovered too late that if we had had our luggage weighed at the airport we would have been charged exactly half. But never mind (" nichevo ") WE WERE GOING TO TIFLIS . . .





## Chapter 16

*Georgian food, wine and music. We walk through the cobbled streets of Tiflis at moonlight—and are thrilled. We wander among churches and spires dating back to the 6th century, and worry “Nannie,” our Intourist guide.*

OUR plane left at 7-20 a.m. It was cold but sunny in Moscow. At Kharkov, where we stopped for thirty minutes, it was hot and sunny. We had flown over endless forests until these had given way to endless plains. We were only shaken for fifteen minutes during the whole trip although we flew low. At Kharkov airport we refreshed ourselves with cool watermelons and hot tea. The next stop was Rostov-on-Don. There we stayed for forty-five minutes. It was a little hotter than at Kharkov. We had our own sandwiches and wine with us as we knew that we could get nothing to eat or

drink on the aircraft and we did not know beforehand whether the stops would coincide with our appetites. We had left Rostov far, far behind us when I suddenly looked up from my book. I caught my breath. Gone were the flat monotonous plains I had got tired of staring at. Here were masses of thickly wooded hills and mountains and then, no, it was just too beautiful: the Black Sea. The aircraft followed the coastline for a long while. All the passengers rushed to the side from which you got a view of the Caucasian Riviera resorts which included Sochi, Stalin's "retreat". The scenery spread below us was magnificent. The last stop before Tiflis was Sukhumi, where we stayed only half an hour, which just gave us time to buy some figs which we ate in a ditch at the side of the road just in front of the airport. The heat had increased again since Rostov.

By 5-45 p.m. (6-45 by Moscow time) we were already circling over Tiflis, a large town cradled amongst rather bare mountains. An *Intourist* female guide and a car met us at the airport and we were driven to the "Hotel Orient". My first impressions of Tiflis were very favourable: there were ups and downs: the streets were not all on the level as in all the Russian towns I had seen. Wherever I looked there were trees and many old, old houses with huge wooden balconies and courtyards, and, in the distance, the high mountains. I felt immediately in a new, strange and beautiful world.

At the hotel we were offered either a room without a bath at 40 roubles a night or a suite with bath at 70 roubles; despite the guide's insistence that we would find the latter far more comfortable, we took the former. But I discovered why the suite had been recommended when I visited the women's toilet! The notice outside was written both in Russian and in English, so I knew that I had not gone to the "men's" by mistake. Otherwise I should certainly have thought so. But the public bathroom was large and clean. We were told that the water was hot every evening, but not in the mornings. Our bedroom was very pleasant and spacious, and had a balcony.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Next door to the hotel was an attractive Caucasian cellar restaurant belonging to *Intourist*. We dined there our first night, and on many other nights, too. I particularly liked the Georgian orchestra of three. The musical instruments were strange but the sounds they produced were vital, passionate, plaintive and exciting. There was rhythm and nostalgia in this "Eastern" music, very different from Russian music and closer to Spanish. One of the instruments resembled a tambourine. I could never have believed that a tambourine could express emotion, but the musician's long, strong, sensitive fingers drew feeling from his round of parchment in an incredible way which completely fascinated me. He sang, too —wild Georgian melodies.

Georgian food I found much more to my taste than Russian food. In Moscow I usually emptied half a salt cellar over every dish, but in Tiflis I ate food properly seasoned. The "shashliks" (mutton on the spit) were delicious in our underground restaurant and to our joy we were given real omelettes, such as we had not tasted since we left Paris. Sturgeon was dear, but there was cheaper fish, too; the soups and stews were spicy, and so were the nut and pepper salads. We drank pink wine with our meals, as the famous red Georgian wines were considered too heavy for the summer. In the restaurants, we saw Georgians order bottle after bottle of wine at meals. They evidently had a limitless capacity.

The Georgians appeared strikingly different from the Russians, both in appearance and character. Thin, very dark, long-nosed and large-eyed, they gesticulated excitedly when they talked. Georgian and Russian are compulsory languages at school, and almost everyone is bi-lingual. The Kurds, who still wear their colourful national costumes, speak Georgian and Turkish. They are traditionally Moslem, but there is no longer any mosque open in Tiflis. Almost every male Georgian has a moustache and wears a white jacket. The women were much more elegantly dressed than in Moscow. I noticed this

## PENELOPE IN MOSCOW

our very first night when we went for a walk after dinner. Even by moonlight the difference was striking. But then, Georgia is a centre of silk factories.

Tiflis by moonlight seemed thrilling. I had never seen so many stars. The air was warm and still, but down by the river there was a very slight breeze. As we wandered from street to street in the soft light cast by the electric lamps shining through the foliage of the acacia and plane trees, we were aware of intense life all around us. We caught glimpses of old people asleep on couches on low balconies or in the courtyards of houses; we saw a dark young beauty peer out of her window, the light was suddenly caught by the wall of an old church; we met groups of young people gathered at corners to laugh and gossip, old men trudging slowly home, young men hurrying to secret rendezvous . . . The narrow cobbled alleys of Tiflis seemed to be bubbling with life, even at night.

The next morning our female *Intourist* guide painstakingly wrote down the various things we hoped to do and see while in Tiflis. Serge asked to be taken over a collective farm ("quite impossible"), a school and a pioneer camp ("just now is a bad moment"); he asked if he could have an interview with the rector of the university ("I can't let you know till later"); if we could visit Tsmandali to see the famous Georgian vineyards ("it would be difficult to arrange") and so on. Whenever the good woman said "but that is very far away" we knew that the particular town or monastery in question would never become known to us except through the illustrations in books.

Meanwhile, she said, we were free to wander about Tiflis itself at will.

To start with, however, she accompanied us almost everywhere. She was a Russian national, and spoke little Georgian and less French. She also had little learning, few interests, poor intelligence, but a heart of gold, which, however, did not compensate for her defects. She was, in fact, a prudish, middle-aged spinster and we nicknamed her "Nannie".



## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

When Serge wanted to have a drink at a small café, she would usually protest that the place was not clean. When we spoke to anyone in the street, she looked highly disapproving. She had no sense of humour; she was ever vigilant, always considered that she was in the right and, knowing nothing, always knew better than anyone else. She would interrupt one in the middle of a sentence; if one was asked a question by a third person, she would answer for one. As *Intourist* guide, she had evidently found it a full-time job to see that foreigners did not stray, so that she was amazed that Serge should know so much about Georgian architecture when she herself knew (and cared) so little.

Nannie made a strong impression on us, her presence could not be ignored and her absence was often longed for.

Tiflis was full of lovely, ancient churches with painted spires, but only two or three still functioned as such. Our first visit was to the "Sionsky" cathedral, dating back to the 11th century. It had been many times restored but was still beautiful and contained a famous crooked cross, encased in very fine silver-work depicting incidents in the life of St. Nina, who had converted the first Christian Georgian Tsar some time in the 4th century. There were also a couple of painted ikons of exceptional artistic and historic interest. Nannie had a violent argument with the handsome Georgian woman who was showing us round, whom she swore was lying about the correct dates of the ikons!

To prove that this woman must be untruthful, Nannie complained that she had just said that her deceased father was in heaven. Didn't that prove the woman a liar? I replied that maybe the poor man was in heaven—how did we know? That made Nannie think. I must be a "believer" or I would not have made such a remark. However, she still had no idea what sort of a God I worshipped, so, when we came to a silver carving which depicted a miracle—a convenient flash of lightning from above descending to destroy an evil God who demanded human sacrifices once a year—Nannie turned towards

## PENELOPE IN MOSCOW

me and explained gently that it was wrong to offer up human beings to God; one should sacrifice animals!

From the church we climbed through picturesque cobbled streets to the ancient fortress of Metekhi. On the way we visited a fairly modern synagogue. A rabbi showed us round and told us that there were a great number of Jews in Tiflis, but did not, however, reveal any figures. Beside the fortress of Metekhi we discovered a rather lovely 13th century church. From this prominence we looked down on the old part of Tiflis. On the way back we saw men and women sitting idly in the sun on their doorsteps while swarms of dark-eyed, half-naked children played in the streets. Domestic chores were performed in the courtyards; cooking, ironing and washing. Life was carried on publicly and naturally, as it might be in Southern Italy. Nannie, our Russian, did not approve.

We managed to shake her off and lunched in a none too clean restaurant of which she would certainly have disapproved. The stew was full of good vegetables, meat and oil. Afterwards we sat in one of the many public gardens scattered throughout the town which are the achievement of Beria, Georgia's Soviet hero No. 2. Georgian children seemed much livelier than Russian children, but I was shocked to see the schoolgirls wearing identical long-sleeved uniforms with those worn in chilly Moscow. In the evening we took a funicular railway and dined at a large modern restaurant at the top of a mountain, from which we could look down on the illuminations of Tiflis. Food and service, however, were not worthy of the view. A party of hospitable Georgians at the next table to ours insisted on providing us with cheese and wine while we were waiting to be served. Georgian cheese, made from sheep's milk, is best eaten when roasted.

The following day Nannie took us to see a 6th century church, now a museum, where we saw Georgian drinking horns, pottery, costumes, and some modern carpets which followed traditional forms in design. The curator of the museum,

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

however, lectured us on the merits of plastic, "the material of the future". He showed us ugly plastic imitations of ancient Georgian ware and explained to us that he personally had been responsible for the revolting twelve-foot vase I had seen among Stalin's 70th birthday presents.

Next, Nannie's programme took us to the Botanical Gardens. They contained trees and shrubs from all over the world, and a profusion of brightly coloured, exotic flowers. It was a veritable fairyland—except for the barbed wire which bordered all the paths and cut off the wanderer from the woods. This was a necessary measure in the interest of the security of the trees which needed careful nursing in the dry climate of Tiflis. Nannie proudly showed us an alley constructed by patriotic young Komsomol voluntary workers. On its wall was an image of Stalin worked in neon lights, which shone red at night: Nannie described this as "culture". Serge climbed up a cliff near the wall to see what the view was like. A policeman immediately appeared and asked him for his papers, explaining that he had climbed on to forbidden territory. Serge had no papers with him, and Nannie almost had a fit. However, she got us away.

On Thursday, September 7th, Nannie told us that we were to be shown over the collection of national treasures in the historical museum, which we were particularly anxious to see. We imagined she had made arrangements. Not at all. When we arrived at the museum at noon we were told that the director could not see us until 2 p.m. When we returned after an early lunch, the director announced that we could not possibly see the treasure as its guardian had gone on holiday with the key of the safe.

On Friday the 8th Nannie took us in an *Intourist* car to Mtskheta, about 20 kilometres from Tiflis, the ancient capital of Georgia until the 5th century. The mountain drive was lovely. Just before reaching Mtskheta, we saw, perched on a hilltop, an ancient monastery which, Serge learnt from his book on Georgia, dated from the 6th century and had served

## PENELOPE IN MOSCOW

as a model for subsequent Georgian churches. Unfortunately, the road up the hill passed at one point through prohibited territory. So that was that. Mtskheta itself contained two very fine 11th century churches. In the smaller of these, the inside walls were once covered with ancient frescoes. About a century ago, however, Tsar Nicholas I visited Mtskheta, and to impress him the local clergy had the frescoes covered over with whitewash. Efforts are now being made to remove this, but the task is extremely difficult. An old nun showed us over this church, one of a group of nuns (most of them even older) who were paid a pension by the state to live on the church premises and see to their upkeep. Nannie warned us anxiously that the nun would tell us that a certain Georgian saint once lived on the premises, which was untrue. She, Nannie, was giving us this information so that we should realise the nun was lying.

The larger 11th century church was partly rebuilt in the 15th century, but retained its original 11th century facade. We were shown over the interior by a dark, bearded Georgian priest. When we asked him to tell us something about a group of heavily bearded and armed warriors in a large and remarkable fresco depicting the apocalypse, he said that we were looking at "the wise and the foolish virgins". "How can he tell such a lie?" expostulated Nannie, "It isn't true, is it, that holy women have beards?" The only saint she was able to recognise was St. Nicholas. Whenever she saw an ikon or a fresco representing him she would exclaim excitedly: "That's Mr. Nicholas; I know him; it's the truth." We saw many lovely frescoes which had never been subjected to whitewash like those in the other church. Their origin was obscure. Those on the walls by the altar were in exceptionally good condition, but as only men were allowed there, Nannie and I had to peep through the grating.

Outside the church, three Georgians started talking to Serge. One was a journalist writing for a local Tiflis paper which Serge had been reading. Nannie bore down on us,

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

wearing her most forbidding expression, and I could see the men look at her nervously. "Have you been to Gori yet?" one asked. "That is on our programme for next week," announced Nannie firmly, even though the question had been addressed to Serge. When the journalist asked Serge if we were related to a certain Tiflis citizen of a similar name, Nannie, truly terrified, started dragging us towards the car before we had time to reply.

The next morning we were to visit a small church standing half way up the mountain whose peak we had previously reached by funicular. Nannie had arranged this trip several days in advance, and had insisted we should go on a Saturday. She said that she would just whisper a word to the man controlling the funicular, and the car would be stopped half way for us. Nannie's authority over the funicular turned out to be less than she had inferred, for before she could arrange for a halt, we had to go all the way up and come half way down again. Nannie felt she had suffered a severe loss of face over this. When we finally reached the church (11th century, but much restored) we were told that it was only open Thursdays and Sundays! "Why then did you choose a Saturday to bring us here?" Serge anxiously asked Nannie. "Years ago the church used to be open every day; that is the truth, cross my heart," was the answer. We looked at the view, and the tombs of Stalin's mother and of Griboedov, the famous 19th century Russian playwright. Stalin's mother was a very religious woman and had been buried just outside this, her favourite church.

Serge and I lunched at the mountain top restaurant after Nannie had left us. We then struck out across country, aiming for a distant wooded peak. Just before reaching our objective, we had to cross some ploughed land. To my horror I found that I was trampling underfoot part of the new afforestation scheme, but at first I had not realised that the tiny fluffy things I mistook for weeds were the trees of the future. The view from our hilltop was magnificent and exhilarating.

After a few minutes, however, a dark horseman, carrying a large rifle, came trotting up. "Lovely view, isn't it?" Serge remarked conversationally in Russian. "Comrades, this is forbidden territory," was the rider's greeting. Luckily he rode on, while we departed hastily.

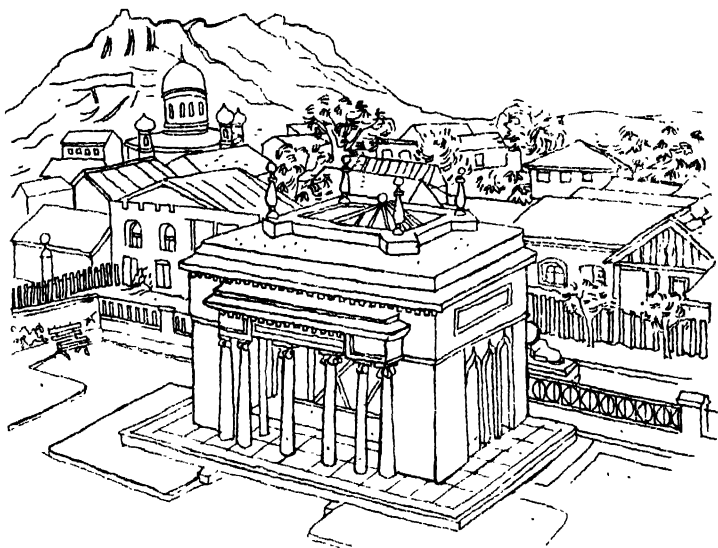
On Sunday, September 10th, Nannie was off duty, and Serge and I took a picnic lunch and caught a train to Mtskheta all on our own—feeling very grown-up. We thoroughly enjoyed our adventure and returned on an evening train which was packed to bursting. We stood, of course, and I caught a smile on the face of a young girl squashed so tightly against me that she could hardly breathe. She had short straight, untidy black hair, huge expressive dark eyes, and bare, dirty feet, and was wearing a simple short-sleeved wool frock. I smiled back at her. "How are things with you?" she asked us in Russian. "Fine," I replied, "And what about you?" She shrugged her shoulders. I thought that she must be 11 or 12, but she said she was 14, and spoke fluent Russian with a strong Georgian accent. She wanted to know where we came from. "France." She looked at us as if we had said we came from Mars. When she finally realised that we were not joking, she advised us not to go round telling everyone in Tiflis that we were French. She gave no reason for this.

She also told us that she lived in Tiflis with her mother and brothers and sisters. She had lost her father and one brother in the war. She said that she went to school. She fingered my very ordinary cotton dress and my wedding ring with tremendous awe and admiration. She told us that she had once seen our French "boss" on the screen, but could not remember his name. We offered her a bar of chocolate. At first she shook her head, but after we had insisted, she took it and immediately broke off a piece and offered it to me. I said I had already eaten plenty, and then her eyes lit up with joy and she expressed her gratitude with great enthusiasm. On arriving at Tiflis, we gave her another bar of chocolate as we walked down the platform together towards the exit. She slowly and

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

carefully undid the paper wrapping and was standing contemplating the contents when an unpleasant-looking youth brutally took her by the arm and dragged her away. Just outside the station we found her standing in the midst of a mob of shouting people, including a policeman. She was protesting vigorously in Georgian and had started to cry, the policeman patted her on the back and walked off, and in a minute everyone had melted away and we were alone with her.

We asked her what had happened. She said indignantly that the policeman had accused *her* of being a "hooligan"; in fact the young man was really a "hooligan" who had asked her to go home with him and had snatched her chocolate away. "Young men in Tiflis are very badly behaved," she concluded. We believed her. We asked her where we could find a bus to take us to Beria Square. She took us to a tram, saying that it would be cheaper for us. She got in at the same time, and Serge paid her fare as far as our stop and gave her enough money for her return journey from there. She enjoyed the tram ride as any child would have done and got out with us and said "good-bye" and "thank you" and disappeared into the crowd. Another personal encounter: we were glad we had met her.



## Chapter 17

*More holiday atmosphere, magnificent drives, old churches and frescoes. We picnic, we bathe, we are arrested—and are sad to leave Tiflis. A glimpse of the lush, beautiful Black Sea Riviera, and then—the return to the depressing Moscow winter.*

MONDAY, the 11th, looked a grey and uninviting day. I went to the hairdresser in the morning. Nannie accompanied me and faithfully sat by my side until the drying process was completed. It was done in two parts as there was no regulator on the dryer. Before lunch, Nannie took us to a little "treasure" shop run by an old Georgian artisan who manufactured new "art treasures" based on ancient designs. He had a long beard, a queerly shaped protruding stomach, and looked like a Dickens character. We chose a belt of silver gilt filigree work ornamented with small turquoises, said to be



## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

70 years old. 500 roubles (over £45) was the price quoted. We paid 400. Next, Nannie took us to an exhibition of Georgian pictures, which was rather less depressing than some of the exhibitions we had seen in Moscow. There was at least some vitality and warmth about these rather conventional Georgian landscape paintings. During lunch at a restaurant some Georgians at the next table became extremely friendly and gave us glasses of surprisingly good brandy in exchange for the wine we offered them. They were calling Serge "Seryozha" in no time, recommended us to visit all the places which we had not got permission to see, and were most anxious that we should enjoy our holiday. We did not discuss politics at all and only drank to "peace" once!

On Tuesday, the 12th, we started out early by car for Gori. We had managed to get permission to visit a 7th century monastery called "Athensky Sion," about 20 kilometres beyond Gori. The sixty mile drive from Tiflis to Gori was impressive enough, but the drive from Gori to "Athensky Sion" was superb. We followed a sandy, stony road which wound its way round the mountains. Exotic trees lined the road; small timber houses with great wooden balconies seemed to cling for dear life to the mountain-side; geese, fowl and cattle clustered at the roadside. At each bend in the road a new scene of natural beauty enchanted us. Nannie, most of the time, was in a state of nerves that the *Intourist* car might break down. She thought that we would never reach the monastery and began to doubt if it really existed. "I can't think why you want to go there," she wailed, "No foreigner has been there before and I have never been there myself."

At last we rounded a corner and came upon a monastery, perfectly proportioned, glistening pink in the sun, perched on a hill-top. We could not drive right up as the road was under repair. We asked a workman how we could get hold of the key and he pointed back to the last village we had passed. We found the Georgian inhabitants suspicious but Nannie acted

## PENELOPE IN MOSCOW

as interpreter and finally produced a very timid peasant woman who gave us the key and agreed reluctantly to accompany us. She was not old yet seemed ageless; her hair and eyes were colourless, her cotton clothes patchy, and her shoes worn out.

The monastery exceeded our expectations. It was in itself a gem of perfection, constructed in the form of a cross, according to the convention of that time. The surrounding countryside formed a perfect setting. With sparkling eyes and bated breath we made our way slowly up the hill. "Look at these fascinating basrelief figures!" I exclaimed to Serge as I paused in front of the church. The key did not turn in the lock very easily. We feared that we might after all our trouble have to content ourselves with the exterior, but the door finally yielded and we stepped inside. "What lovely frescoes!" Serge and I exclaimed to each other. "Pouf! what a stink!" cried Nannie. The floor was fouled with birds' droppings and cluttered up with planks of rotting timber. But the frescoes, about which little was known, were in parts very well preserved. They covered the walls and Serge judged them to date from the 10th century. The figures were full of grace and expressed feeling and movement, very different from the stiff Byzantine figures I had expected to see. Nannie began to cheer up when she recognised St. Nicholas amongst the other saints. The old peasant woman meanwhile stood on her own in a corner, looking a picture of misery. She told Nannie that she felt strange in a church where services were no longer held and asked: "When are they going to give us back our priest?" Nannie translated this for us, adding no comment of her own.

We drove back to Gori to visit the house where Stalin was born. Originally it was one of a row of nice little red-brick houses. To-day it stands alone, sheltered under a revoltingly ugly temple erected by the faithful. We were shown the room where Stalin spent his earliest childhood. His two brothers had died shortly after his birth. The furniture was of the simplest; a divan in one corner with a Georgian coverlet; a bed; an ornamented chest; a table. Then there was the

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

samovar; a looking-glass; a pottery jug and a few other objects. The samovar and the mirror were the original ones; some of the other things were exact replicas of the originals. The guide pointed out that the towel was not the original of Stalin's babyhood. The small museum contained photographs, newspapers and newspaper cuttings relating to Stalin's early revolutionary activities in the Caucasus, when he was busy printing illegal papers; also, some remarkably inartistic recent oil paintings showing Stalin as a young man.

The following day we went to see a replica of Stalin's illegal printing press in Tiflis. That night we met the most unpleasant Soviet citizen we ever encountered. We were dining at a dingy little underground restaurant, waiting for our hot Georgian cheese course, when a fair-haired young Russian asked us to join his table. He was eating alone and was slightly drunk. He said his name was Ivan. If he had not told us, we would have been sure that it was Adolf. He opened the conversation by asking me how many languages I knew. "Four," said Serge, exaggerating. "I speak six; that is better," announced Ivan. I lit a cigarette. Ivan fixed me with an icy blue stare. "Women should not smoke." Serge gave a start and reminded Ivan of Hitler. Ivan changed the subject. He asked us which country we came from. I told him I came from England. Ivan promptly launched into a violent attack on *The British Ally*, the weekly newspaper until recently put out by the British Embassy in Moscow. "Have you read it?" we asked. "No." He was under the impression that it had been closed down by the Soviet authorities. We explained that the British had closed it and I added that a Soviet newspaper was still published in London. "Yes," exclaimed Ivan, "Our papers tell the truth; yours only lie. If you dared close down our paper in London, we would re-open it; you'd see!" He looked at me threateningly.

To calm him down, we raised our glasses to "peace". "Truman and Churchill want war." Ivan glared at me. "Stalin would never receive Churchill again," he added arrogantly.

Next, Ivan asked how we were enjoying our holiday. We said that we loved Tiflis and I added that I found the Georgians such delightful people. Ivan raised his blonde head, and, waving his hand in a scornful gesture around the restaurant, said in a loud voice: "If you want black-headed people you are welcome. I am a Russian." With this he pointed to his fair hair. We remembered Hitler again. "Of course we are very pleased to be in Tiflis," Serge continued, "but we have been unable to get permission to visit various ancient towns and monasteries we had hoped to see." "You want to see our factories," said Ivan, glowering. We explained that we were not interested in factories. Ivan did not believe us. The conversation was then directed into army channels. "I have the rank of Captain," announced Ivan proudly. "I was never an officer," remarked Serge. "I am of higher rank than you then," said Ivan. Serge started to get up to salute but, with a lordly gesture, Ivan motioned him to remain seated. "In my country in two days I can become a colonel," Ivan went on. "How?" asked Serge. "By taking a dangerous objective and losing a large number of officers and men in the attempt." "Surely," protested Serge, "it would be better to remain a captain and lose less men." Ivan did not agree. We went home shortly after the conversation had reached this point. Not such a good personal encounter.

On Thursday, September 14th, we were arrested. We had decided to find a sheltered spot for a picnic. Being without Nannie, we took a bus and then we took a tram, hoping that we would end up in agreeable surroundings. The tram terminus was at the gates of a gigantic cemetery full of cypress trees. We followed the main road until we came to a lane leading up into some promising looking hills. When we found a pleasant, sheltered spot, we decided to settle there for the afternoon. We ate and we read and we stretched ourselves in the sun. From a nearby group of cottages came strains of Georgian music. A wedding or perhaps a banquet, we thought. Suddenly, about 5 p.m., we saw a long funeral procession

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

marching straight towards us. The mourners were making for another cemetery up in the hills. The leaders of the procession carried red banners and a photograph of the deceased who looked exactly like Lenin. The widow was wailing and sobbing loudly. We had no time to get out of the way, so stood to attention respectfully as the procession filed past us. Everyone threw us extremely odd, suspicious glances as they went by.

We had just sat down again when a dark, unshaven, unsavoury-looking individual, wearing some sort of navy blue uniform, came up to us and peremptorily told us that we had no right to be there. We said that we would soon be leaving. The man rejoined the procession, but he quickly returned a second time. "Follow me to the police," he ordered us, in Russian. We expostulated. "Who are you?" he asked rudely continuing: "You are not one of us. How do I know you are not here for some illegal purpose? You have been taking photographs haven't you?" We said that we did not have a camera and had merely been picnicking. Was that forbidden? "You are under Soviet law here," was the reply, "Your papers, please." Serge produced his press card and the man promptly pocketed it. "French?" he inquired rather disgustedly, "Follow me to the police."

We had no alternative but to do so. He was probably armed, anyway. We passed some people on the way who told us that he was a "forest guardian". We then came to a parked car, containing three sinister looking characters, exactly like gangsters in a detective film. Two of the men were asleep in the back. The forest guardian showed Serge's press card to the one sitting in front. He gave us a quick look and nodded in silence. I put out my hand to recover the card. The guardian pushed it away with a threatening remark. I tried to speak to the man in the front of the car. He turned the other way. The guardian marched us on, down a steep slope. My shoes slipped so I descended slowly. "Come on, come on," roughly shouted the guardian. "Are you afraid of me?" I said that I preferred to walk slowly. The guardian, who was very obviously drunk,

began to enjoy himself. " You have rules like ours in France? " he asked. " We do not," I almost shrieked, " France is free! " My cry echoed hollowly round the mountains and was lost in the wind. We went on walking. At last we reached the police station on the main road: three or four rather sullen-looking white-uniformed militia-men. The forest guardian gleefully handed us over and produced Serge's press card. We had no further trouble. The police, after consulting among themselves in Georgian, decided that we were no spies after all, and said that we were free to go. It was almost an anti-climax. We asked if we had strayed into a forbidden zone. We were told that we had not, and we could return to our hills if we wanted to. The militia-men were extremely sorry that the forest guardian had been mistaken about us, but they said that we should not bear him a grudge as he had only been a little over-zealous in carrying out his duty. The whole incident depressed me.

On our return to the hotel, more frustration greeted us. Nannie's boss, a male *Intourist* official, informed us regretfully that we definitely would not be able to visit the rest of the places Serge had written down in his list of requests the day after our arrival; we had already seen all that we were allowed to. Permission from Moscow was needed for any further excursion beyond a 25 kilometre radius of the town. We protested feebly that we had been told in Moscow that we could get permission on the spot for visiting non-forbidden zones near Tiflis. The *Intourist* guide smilingly shook his head and handed us a book of photographs of all the places we would not be able to see.

I remember September 17th as the day we went to the football match.

Nannie had procured three tickets. Although uninterested in the game, she insisted on accompanying us. The match was between the Tiflis Dynamos and the Moscow Red Army team. At the bus-stop we found a large crowd of football enthusiasts who made mad rushes for each bus which came along, fighting and kicking to get on, regularly knocking down one or two of

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

their weaker fellow-travellers in their struggle. Nannie decided that we had better walk.

It was a long way, and we arrived panting at the stadium just as the match was about to start. We pushed in through the wrong entrance, for Nannie had no idea of the whereabouts of our seats. Old and young were rushing in all directions while frantic militia-men kept up a hoarse chorus of "tickets, tickets" and tried to catch any youngster attempting to get in without one. We asked a policeman how to get to our places. He vaguely pointed somewhere. We asked several other people and were told to go in the opposite direction. We chased up and down steps and in and out of overflowing stands for nearly half an hour, while the game got well under way. We finally realised that the only way to our seats would take us through a "forbidden zone", a roped-off space manned by several policemen which we were not allowed to cross. "You can't come this way without a special permit," firmly announced one of the militia-men. "But these are foreigners," said Nannie haughtily. "Not without a permit," was the answer. In the end a superior officer arrived and let us through.

We found our seats already occupied. After half-time we managed all three to find a space somewhere. The Georgian spectators were madly excited, and whistled and clapped and jumped up and down. By the time the match was over Nannie still had not discovered which side was which. The final score was two all. We waited to leave until the crowd had thinned out a bit. We hoped to get a bus, but as none appeared after half an hour we made for a tram instead. Though most of the football fans had already got home, the first trams which passed were so full that people were hanging on to everything possible from all angles.

We concluded that the organisation of a football match in Tiflis was a very different affair from the same thing in Moscow, where there were about two policemen per spectator to ensure the smooth working of everything. When we finally got seats in the tram, I sat next to Nannie. Several

beggars came and asked us for money. "Does that happen to you in Moscow?" inquired Nannie. "Often," I replied. "But since you have been in Tiflis, it has not happened to you in the streets?" Nannie continued. "It has," I answered truthfully, "Several times." "Where? Outside churches?" Nannie was starting to look worried. "Both outside churches and in the streets," I told her. Before she could find a suitable rejoinder, some "hooligans" boarded the tram. "Hold your bag tightly," advised Nannie. "In Paris, of course you have a lot of pick-pockets?" "Not nearly as many as in the Soviet Union," I answered feelingly. "But I was told that a great deal of thieving went on in Paris." Nannie was getting more and more upset. "I assure you that there are many less pick-pockets and bag snatchers." "Ah!" exclaimed Nannie triumphantly, "That is because you have so many police in Paris." "What?" I retorted indignantly, "Never in all my life have I seen as many policemen as in Moscow; just never."

On September 20th, after tremendous arguments, we finally managed to reach Tskhneti, a place for which we had previously failed to obtain any bus-tickets. *Intourist* had informed us that all the tickets were sold out to delegations, but we did not find one member of any delegation on the bus. In fact, we were the only non-Georgian passengers.

The drive was beautiful, up and up a winding road through glorious mountain scenery. Tskhneti we found to be an enchanting mountain village, full of trees, animals, peasants and picturesque cottages. After leaving the bus we followed a path leading into the hills, thickly covered by trees and bushes. We passed a great many notices stating that anyone found damaging a tree in "green territory" would be liable to a heavy fine or one year's hard labour. There were a great many new baby trees beginning to sprout all around us. We were so terrified of damaging anything that we ate our lunch by the side of the road. We carefully selected a spot marked by an old tin as having been chosen by other picnickers before us. The presence of the tin made us feel safer. A number of farm



## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

workers passed by us in their carts and on foot as we ate and read in the sun. We did not see either a policeman or a forest guardian all day. The small, blue, shaky bus took us back at 5-30 p.m. A very nice girl at the tiny bus station provided us with chairs while we waited and allowed us to choose our seats on the return bus. Two Georgian women had a violent quarrel over one of the seats. I had no idea why, as the bus was by no means full.

The next day our luck changed again. We could not get tickets to the place we wanted to go to. At the bus station, after we had stood in a long queue, a man angrily told us to apply through *Intourist*. We went to *Intourist*, who told us that *they* had to get tickets from the bus station and the people at the bus station refused to give them any!

So we went once more to Mtskheta, and made straight for a bathing place near the station. We fully expected to be asked to produce our papers and then to be told that foreigners were not admitted. However, a young man whom we diffidently approached, paused in the middle of his game of billiards just long enough to tell us to use one of the cabins to undress in. We were the only bathers, except for a pair of hogs. The river was lined with a very thick layer of slimy mud, but that did not worry us once we had started to swim. After lunch we went in search of a more sheltered spot inland. It was so pleasant and warm that we missed the 5-50 train back. We decided to hitch-hike. The car I induced to stop for us was already full to bursting with the driver and his son in front, and two old women and all sorts of baggage in the back seats. However, the driver told his son to get into the back, too, and Serge and I sat in front. I had to accommodate myself more or less under Serge's feet as it was strictly against all Soviet regulations for three people to sit in front and we had to pass two sets of "control" militia. Luckily I went unobserved in the dark. I imagine that our driver was a professional chauffeur as he drove particularly well and I doubt if he would have owned a private car just for his own pleasure. He charged

us a reasonable price for the journey and was delighted with the French cigarettes Serge gave him.

On September 23rd we walked through Tiflis, looking at the fascinating old timber houses with their big balconies, some of which seemed to be growing straight out of the cliffs leading down to the river far beneath us. Despite the fact that bathing was strictly prohibited in this part of the river owing to the strong current, there were a large number of naked little boys defying the regulations and thoroughly enjoying themselves.

Sunday, September 24th, was our last day in Tiflis. The weather was perfect and we ordered the *Intourist* car at 30 roubles an hour (getting on for £3) first to take us for a drive round the outskirts of the town and then to visit "Barren Lake". Nannie came with the car. The first road the chauffeur took led us slap into a forbidden zone guarded by police. No foreigners were allowed through. We changed roads, went for a pleasant drive and ended up at the lake, called "Barren" owing to the treeless hills encircling it. On one side it was bordered by reeds. The water glistened bright blue in the sunlight. Feeling lazy, I lay on the shore with Nannie, and gossiped about the latest foreign arrivals at the hotel, three French friends of ours from the Embassy. Nannie thought them all "very distinguished". Two of them had recently been married in Moscow. "Do tell me about the wedding," begged Nannie. "Of course the bride wore white and had a garland of orange blossoms as everyone does in France?" "No," I replied, "the bride wore a short dress and, you know, many people in France get married in registry offices as they do here." Nannie looked shocked and disappointed. I was sorry to have exploded one of her more romantic theories about France, a country which, before meeting me, she had imagined as full of police and white brides.

On September 25th we had to catch an 8-25 p.m. train to take us back north again. We bought some cheap provisions for the journey since we had little money left: fresh walnuts, toffee filled with nuts, tomatoes, cheese, sausages and bread.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Now that our stay was coming to an end, we almost felt we would miss Nannie. She was such a fascinating illustration of a conventionally silly woman with a "Marxist" education. Yet she was kind. She insisted on conducting us to the station more than half an hour before our train was due to leave. As a last gesture of good-will, we went with her without protest. As I was standing on the platform smoking, a very fat Russian brushed past me saying: "You should not smoke; that is why you are so thin." I was really sad to be leaving Tiflis. Despite all the regulations and frustrations, we had enjoyed our three weeks' sunshine, the mountains, the beauty and the heat, the Georgian food and wine, the animated people and our own sense of physical well-being. At last it was time to go. We climbed into our "international" carriage "2nd class" (i.e., 1st class but without private wash basin) and waved good-bye to Nannie and our French acquaintances who had come along. Good-bye, Tiflis!

I shall never forget that wonderful three-day journey back to Moscow.

The first morning we reached Sukhumi at 7 a.m. We bought our breakfast at the station: hot fritters stuffed with rice. They tasted good! From Sukhumi onwards, until 4 p.m., the train slowly followed the Black Sea coast. The scenery was lovely. On one side of us was the vivid blue sea, lapping against grey pebbles on the beaches; trees of all sorts, including cypresses, came right down to the water's edge. On the other side of us there were the mountains—thickly, gorgeously, richly wooded mountains. The foliage was more luscious, than near Tiflis. There were palm trees, brilliant flowers and a huge variety of different shrubs. Nature had become voluptuous. We got out of the train whenever it stopped for 10 or 15 minutes, which it did frequently, and bought pears, corn-on-the-cob, etc. The whole area was banned to foreigners, and soldiers were to be seen in the most unlikely-looking beauty spots. We also saw bands of workers building bridges, etc., always accompanied by armed guards.

We soon reached the coastal "sanatorium" district. The sanatoria were great white buildings, some of them half hidden by luxuriant trees and shrubs. I fell in love with Gagri, the place where my Russian teacher, Sonia, had spent her last holiday. There the mountains came right down to the sea. Sochi, Stalin's holiday resort, is a fairly big town and seemed to have something of a Brighton or Blackpool atmosphere. At one station we thought it might be nice to go and sit for a few minutes on some grass at the bottom of a hill covered with particularly magnificent trees, but were stopped by a militia-man pacing to and fro in front of a notice bearing the legend "Forbidden Zone".

As we went further north, the foliage changed, the mountains became smaller. We passed swarms of nude sunbathers, lying on long pale-blue wooden benches on the beaches, divided up according to sex. Those in mixed groups were not nude. Every group looked intensely organised. Some way beyond Sochi, the train stopped by a deserted stretch of beach to wait for another train to pass. The attendant announced in a loud voice: "Passengers, you have 17 minutes here; you may bathe!" There followed a wild rush for bathing dresses and then for the sea. Prudery was forgotten and men and women dashed along the beach, struggling into their bathing clothes as they went. Failing bathing costumes, they stripped to their underclothes.

At last we left the coast and slowly climbed up into the hills. Here the trees were beginning to don their autumn colours; the grass was rich and green as it is in Ireland; we travelled on through large mountain forests, illuminated by the afternoon sun. We got out of the train at one stop to admire the view. A line of rosy-cheeked peasants squatted beside big basketfuls of rosy apples. Behind them we saw the homes of some of the local hill dwellers; abandoned railway carriages full of families. The train continued its journey and night fell, blotting out the mountain scenery.

The following morning we awoke shivering despite the pale

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

sun. The scenery was flat and the houses whitewashed, with thatched roofs and tiny windows. A few trees and bushes appeared every now and again, and then, quite unexpectedly, the grey-blue Sea of Azov. As we traversed the Ukraine, we passed rich wheatfields and ploughed land with occasional woods to break the monotony. No more hills. The train stopped at various dim-looking industrial towns. At one halt we saw an armed woman standing in front of some "Secret" building; at another, a group of people stood with hands tied behind their backs in the charge of an armed guard. One of the railway officials dropped into our compartment for a little chat. He told us that all capitalists wanted war and the Soviet masses alone stood for peace. The majority of the passengers on the train were in military uniform. We had 45 minutes stop at Kharkov and so we went for a walk. We had time to be impressed with the fine modern Post Office building near the station and to notice how shoddily the people were dressed. However, we were some way from the smarter residential quarter.

We arrived back in Moscow at 2-30 the next afternoon. The weather was cold and grey and, as we drew nearer and nearer to the capital, the trees became barer and barer. In travelling from Tiflis to Moscow we had skipped autumn and come straight from late summer into winter. I felt very depressed and even the news that the central heating and hot water were working at the Metropole for the first time for a week or so failed to cheer me up. Every year there is a hot-water-less period just before the central heating is turned on. We had managed to miss it this time.

Our maids seemed delighted to have us back. One of them, in the emotional stress of the moment, confided in me that she had been married at 18 and had lost her husband during the civil war. She had remained a widow ever since as it was no good hoping to find a second husband as good as her first. "You see, most men get quarrelsome and violent when they are drunk, but my husband just went quietly to bed. He was a

## PENELOPE IN MOSCOW

fine man and I never wanted to risk remarrying." Another maid whispered to me how she hated Moscow, adding: " And I am sure you do, too, and it is not just the climate."

We were back in the capital of the Soviet Union, back in the Metropole Hotel, back to winter, diplomatic parties, vodka, ballet, and all the good and bad of Moscow life.



## Chapter 18

*A brief holiday in the North: the old churches and streets of Vladimir. We meet a sober, intelligent engineer, and some gaily drunken farmers.*

As Serge still had a few days' holiday left, we decided to spend a week-end at Vladimir, about 190 kilometres from Moscow. We had no difficulty in getting our permit for this trip, but *Intourist* got us train tickets for the wrong day. We finally set off at 1-10 a.m. in the early morning of Saturday, October 7th. The journey lasted five hours and we travelled 3rd class, "hard". We were four in a compartment with full length wooden benches. We hired bedding at 10 roubles, nearly £1 a head. We had two travelling companions. One was a middle-aged woman with a kind face who chatted about the romance of the Volga and spent a great deal of her time in the corridor with a "boy-friend", and a young engineer aged

about 25. He worked in a metal factory and was full of genuine enthusiasm for the Soviet *régime*.

We talked for two hours. As "Comrade X." seemed far more intelligent and educated than most of our chance contacts, it may be worth reporting the conversation in some detail. He said that he knew that the Americans had good machines, but they were no better than Soviet machines—merely more smartly finished and polished and done up in fancy coloured paper for export. When the Soviet Union was receiving some U.S. machines which he personally had examined, he found that they differed from what was written on the prospectus. He knew also that many American workers owned cars, but, he emphasised, the USA was an industrial power long before the Soviet Union was even born and one day Soviet workers would lack for nothing.

He said further that a friend of his had visited England and was appalled at the bad conditions and out-of-date machinery in the British coal mines. The USSR was far ahead in that field. Hadn't we seen a Soviet coal mine? We certainly should, and then we should also visit his factory at Sverdlovsk and see for ourselves what wonderful machines there were in the USSR. We said that we did not doubt it, but unfortunately the Soviet authorities forbade foreigners to visit factories or mines. Comrade X. reflected for a moment and then remembered having been told about a spy in foreign pay who had recently been caught with a secret radio transmitter. That would explain why the Soviets had to be on their guard with foreigners. "Of course," he conceded, "I know that it is easier for our people to get about your countries than vice-versa, but our agents are so much better supported." (Whatever that meant.) He then asked us if we had to have a permit to visit Vladimir. We said that we had got one. "Then you can go there freely and unaccompanied?" "Oh yes," "Then why do foreign journalists complain about travelling restrictions?" We tried to explain to Comrade X. exactly why. He actually agreed that it was very difficult these days for a journalist not



## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

to take either one side or the other when writing about the USSR.

We then started discussing the world situation. Comrade X. said bitterly: "The Americans have never suffered from war on their own territory. We know what it is like." He told us that he was quite sure that "the capitalists" did not want peace, despite the fact that he listened regularly to the "Voice of America" and the BBC broadcasts in Russian. "They are worse than the German propaganda during the war," he remarked. "Of the two, the British are a little better than the American broadcasts, but they are stupid and false too." He went on to say that President Truman had the face of a Jesuit(!) "Ah, Roosevelt!" exclaimed Comrade X., "He was a friend of our country, but he died suddenly, and immediately afterwards American policy towards us changed. Surely that proves that he was assassinated?" We said that we did not think so.

"What news of the Communist Party in France?" Comrade X. then enquired. "Its strength has slightly diminished recently." "Why?" "Because of the strikes." "I simply cannot understand why France has not got a Communist government." "There are not a majority of Communists in France; they only poll 25 per cent of the votes." "But look what we did when we came to power originally; we were not a majority either." Here I intervened to remind Comrade X. that the pre-revolutionary Tsarist *régime* in Russia was a very different type of government from the freely-elected French Government of to-day. "After all," I concluded, "the French are not so badly off really, you know." "Are your schools free like ours? Are your universities free? Are the workers' holidays paid for? Do you have workers' sanatoriums all over the Riviera?" He evidently had no idea that ordinary people could go to the seaside in England and France. It seemed too difficult to explain to him. Comrade X had just returned from a month and 5 days vacation at Sochi. He told us that his railway fare was paid for

## PENELOPE IN MOSCOW

and also two-thirds of his expenses at the sanatorium. He added that lower grade workers paid their own railway fares but had all other expenses paid.

We then turned to "culture". We criticised the Soviet "direction" in this field. Comrade X. explained that while every effort was being made to build up Communism in the USSR, it was only right that intellectuals should serve the cause. Serge said that great musicians, for instance, were seldom appreciated by the general public during their lifetime. Comrade X. said that Tchaikovsky, Glinka and Rimsky-Korsakoff had always been loved in Russia. Serge said that Mussorgsky had not. Comrade X. had no reply ready so contented himself by reiterating that music should be written for the people and books should have a proper Communist moral.

"Life has always been hard for the Russians," Comrade X. went on, "but look how much we have achieved since the Revolution despite the fact that we have never been understood abroad and have been continually threatened by other countries and forced to expend so much of our resources on armaments. Our present economic situation could be improved beyond recognition if only we did not have to concentrate on making ourselves stronger than the USA." We said that England and France too were very much handicapped by the armaments race. Comrade X. pointed out to us that England and France had accepted Marshall Aid whereas Soviet Russia had recovered from the war without any outside help, but that was because the Soviet people worked hard, being free and unexploited, contrary to workers in capitalist countries.

We arrived at Vladimir at 6 a.m. It was cold and misty. We followed the porter to our hotel. He went ahead, wheeling our luggage on a cart. The hotel was not run by *Intourist* so we had not been able to reserve a room in advance. A theatre troupe had just been assigned to a dormitory which one of the members declared cold and smelly as we put in our request for a room. We were given a pleasant bedroom without a smell.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

It was no colder than was inevitable one week before the central heating was due to be turned on. The public wash-place was clean. Washing was "mixed", men and women together and in cold water. However, one could always get a basin of hot water from the samovar which was constantly on the boil in the passage. The "ladies" was a positively luxurious set-up compared to the one in Tiflis!

We went to bed till midday, when we awoke to a blue sky. Before going out we made ourselves some Nescafé. We asked for sugar but were told that none was to be had in Vladimir. Vladimir is a charming provincial town with several fine churches. If it had not been for the loudspeakers in the streets, we really might have fancied ourselves in "Old Russia". We made straight for the 12th century cathedral, dating back to the days when Vladimir was the capital city. It was very beautiful; white with gilded cupolas. We were just admiring the famous ancient frescoes restored by Rublev when two angry cleaning women chased us out with their brooms. They told us that we needed a permit from the director of the museum to enter the cathedral. As we had left our papers with the hotel people for the necessary registration of our presence, we decided to go to the museum another day. From the cathedral we went to see "Dmitrievsky Sobor," a remarkably beautiful 12th century church covered with extraordinary small carved figures. We could not go inside as repair work ("remont") was in full swing. Although the surrounding country was flat, I found that it had great charm. From the top of a bank I looked across bright green fields to autumn woods, glowing pink and orange in the sunlight. At my feet lay the River Kliazma, after which the hotel was named.

Serge produced the guidebook and suggested going to Bogoliubov to visit a monastery on the River Nerl. We took a bus. Bogoliubov is 11 kilometres from Vladimir. The monastery, white and graceful, stands in the middle of a field, protected by trees and facing the river. It is of the same period as "Dmitrievsky Sobor" and resembles it in shape.

On our way back to the bus stop we looked over a 17th century monastery which seemed to combine the functions of post office and farm. We had some time to wait for our bus. It was getting dark and cold. A man started to play an accordion and two girls began to dance. Goats and geese pottered about in the background. It all might have taken place fifty years ago.

The following morning we caught an 8-o bus going to Suzdal. The road was bad and the bus shook us merrily up and down. The country was green and flat and thickly sown with churches. Suzdal is a quiet little market town with one main cobbled street bordered by picturesque timber cottages. It contains about 20 churches. There were many more before the Revolution. The most beautiful of all the churches lies behind mellow red brick walls. It is the Suzdal Kremlin, but unfortunately it now serves as a corrective home for delinquent children (or so we thought we understood) and is closed to the public and guarded by the MVD. The only other really ancient church has a museum attached. It was shut, as the director had gone to visit Vladimir. A group of technical workers from Vladimir had come to see the museum at Suzdal. The organiser of this group came and talked to us about his bad luck. He asked us which delegation we belonged to. When we said none, he immediately looked suspicious and inquired whether we had a permit to visit Suzdal.

We spent the morning wandering about the town. We went to have lunch at the only cafe we saw which, as it was Sunday, was full of drunken peasants. Just as we were finishing our meal, three Russians came up to our table. Two out of the three were unsteady on their feet. One of the two addressed me very politely: "I know that I am drunk, but excuse me! My friend (pointing to the sober member of the trio) is an agronomist and I am a collective farmer and I have betted my friend that you are not from Suzdal. You are not one of us, are you?" We said that were not from Suzdal. "But you *are* Soviet?" persisted the collective farmer. Serge said that we

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

came from France. The three men sat down with us. "We are Soviet people—we are all Soviet—we are against war—we want peace throughout the world," announced the collective farmer, hiccupping slightly. He repeated this phrase at regular intervals during the next hour. He ordered a bottle of champagne. "This is Soviet champagne," he remarked proudly as he filled our glasses and knocked over his own. "You see these notes? (he produced his week's earnings for us to admire), they are roubles and not dollars." We said that we had no dollars either.

"I have two daughters," said the farmer. "One of them is studying medicine in Moscow. My son is in the Air Force. He will bomb England, France and America if he is told to. I want you to be my guests. Come home with me to my farm. I want you to see a Soviet collective farm." After another half hour he ordered a second bottle of champagne. Serge insisted on paying this time. Champagne was very dear, 37 roubles a bottle (well over £3). The farmer said that he was a member of the Communist Party. He then returned to the Soviet desire for peace and the readiness of his son to bomb any country he was ordered to bomb, always ending up with his invitation to visit his farm. Meanwhile the sober member of our party was talking earnestly to Serge. "France was the first country to introduce Communism, at the time of the Paris Commune. Why then is it that such a long time has elapsed without her return to the true path?" Here the farmer broke in to ask if it was not Togliatti who led the Communist Party in France. "Of course not," the agronomist corrected patronisingly, "Don't you know that Togliatti is English?" The third member of our party said that "Soviet tractors were the besht in the world." At this point a new arrival burst into the café. He was so stiff with drink that it was a wonder he was able to keep upright. Our table companions seemed sober in comparison. "We've been celebrating since Friday," one of them told us. At last the party began to break up. The agronomist dissuaded the farmer from ordering a bottle of

vodka and he showed distinct relief when Serge and I said that we really did not think we should have time to go round the collective farm. As we parted, he whispered to Serge: " Suzdal had more churches 15 years ago than it has now. The government changed its policy regarding the destruction of religious relics too late . . . "

We went to have a look at the market. We were surprised to see a number of big sacks of flour. They were the first we had seen since we had come to the USSR. Flour in Moscow is only distributed on feast days, although bread and cakes are always plentiful in the shops. We cut across some muddy fields in the direction of a couple of churches just outside the town. Large women were busy piling grain into one of the churches. We gathered that it was now a granary. We were invited inside. The second church was still used as such and we were shown round by an old crone with a squint until the priest relieved her and himself took charge of us. He said that the last foreigners who had visited his church were Austro-Hungarians, not long ago. We felt sure that he meant " democratic " Hungarians but we did not correct him. He offered us a little ikon before we left.

The next day was our last in Vladimir. We went to the museum to ask for a permit to enter the cathedral and were told that it was not necessary as it was open to the public on Mondays. A white-robed, long-haired, handsome priest showed us round and gave us a competent lecture on the lovely 10th and 15 century frescoes.

We left Vladimir full of thoughts of the " old " rather than of " new " Russia.

## Chapter 19

*The Iron Curtain bears down more heavily. Sonia and Elena disappear from my life. I hear Shostakbovitch play. I fall ill, am ordered a luscious diet, and prepare to leave Moscow with few regrets.*

WE arrived back in Moscow in time to read in the press that American aircraft had been flying over territory 100 kilometres inside the Soviet border and had used their machine guns. At least, that was the Soviet version. Somebody (a reliable source) told us that Soviet readers were puzzled why their air force had not shot down the US aircraft. Seige went to see an exhibition of "US atrocities in Korea", consisting of photographs of the results of US bombing. A small child of about 7 years old asked his mother if Hitler was responsible. An army officer went up to the mother and told her that she had no business to bring her child to such an exhibition.

We were back in Moscow for good, with no more leaves, and winter bearing down upon us.

The Soviet Government's pressure against foreigners was increasing. I telephoned Sonia, my Russian teacher, and suggested that we resume our lessons. She said that she was extremely sorry, but extra work at her school would not allow her to continue to teach me. Not even one hour a week? "Unfortunately not." Sonia came to lunch with us to say good-bye, after which I did not see her again. She said that I should ring her up when in difficulties over grammar and she would do what she could to help. I did telephone on three successive occasions. The first time she said that she would ring me two days later, which she did not do. After that she just was not in whenever I telephoned. I was sorry to lose sight

of her. She had been one of my very few friends among the Russians.

We took out subscriptions for several sets of chamber music concerts held in the small hall of the Conservatory. The audience at these concerts seemed surprisingly different from those at larger concerts, or the ballet, the opera or the theatre. There were very few officers in uniform, and on the contrary a great number of young students and older music lovers. The faces we saw around us were refined, intelligent, much like those one would see at concerts of chamber music in any other European capital. The hall was not always full; we often saw the same groups of people over and over again, and came to recognise them. Most of them followed every note of the music with expressions of intense concentration. I had an odd impression that if only we could have talked to the men and women in this concert hall they would have discussed things on their own merits, and not just have repeated what they had read in the newspapers. But of course I could not put this feeling to a test.

We were glad to get an opportunity of hearing a quintet for two violins, alto, violincello and piano, composed by Shostakovitch, who himself played the piano. He is a man of sturdy Russian build, with very short cropped hair and wearing glasses, as he walked on to the stage and stood and glowered at the concert hall—it was only half filled. He then seated himself at the piano and played beautifully. The audience applauded vigorously. Shostakovitch began to look happier and gave an encore. Among those present I noticed Anna Pauker's handsome daughter. I was told later that the concert was so badly attended as a much bigger one was taking place the same night.

Besides concerts and ballet we went to two non-political puppet shows. One was a dolls' concert, a delightful variety show in miniature. I have a suspicion that the audience most enjoyed the "cosmopolitan music" act. It was meant as a skit, but I had seldom heard jazz played so well and the applause



## CHAPTER NINETEEN

was long and loud. Another act featured pairs of animals making love to the strains of sentimental music. A non-musical act showed a tiger engaged in eating its trainer. Obraztsov, the director, explained that when visiting Chicago years ago he had gone to the circus and had never forgotten how disappointed the spectators had looked when the tiger did not eat its trainer. "So I resolved that my audience at least should not be disappointed," he concluded amidst appreciative gales of laughter.

Through the autumn months I continued to try to learn more about Russian habits from such chance conversations as presented themselves. These were few enough. But, for instance, one of our maids, old Liubov, told us that she had herself aborted six of her pregnancies with perfect success. The four children she had chosen to give birth to were doing very well, and she had found four sufficient. Any significance? Abortion, I recalled, had at one time been a much-discussed subject among Soviet intellectuals. It had been legal up to some time during the thirties but since then had been strictly forbidden.

I was pleased when Elena, my Russian governess, came to lunch with us after her return from Yalta, where she had spent her holiday. She said that the countryside was beautiful but the weather had not been really hot. She had stayed at a sanatorium for railway workers who apparently all drank 250 grammes (five normal "helpings") of vodka every day to stimulate their appetite, and then complained that they did not get enough to eat. There was a three-course breakfast including "kasha" (a sort of Russian porridge) and meat. Then there were two courses for lunch, one of which was again meat, then tea, and finally there was a three-course dinner.

After Elena left, I went to see a sick friend. I was late, it was cold, and I made straight for the first taxi on the rank by the Metropole. I did not like the look of the woman at the wheel. I was going to a house in a side-street off one of Moscow's most important main streets. "You know the big street 'Arbat' of

course," I said to the taxi-driver as I got in. "Niet." "But how is that?" "I have never been in Moscow before." It was no good asking if she had a map with her. To my knowledge maps of Moscow just don't exist. I decided to change taxis, but it was not as easy as I had thought. As I slammed the taxi door and approached the next one an official of some sort tapped me on the shoulder and said I could not do that and I must take the first taxi on the line or no taxi at all. He then gave the necessary directions to the sullen driver. "Now do you understand where we are going?" I asked her as we drove off. "Niet." I knew the first part of the route but at a certain cross-roads I was not sure which was the quickest way to take. "Could you please ask?" I suggested to the driver. "Niet." I had to get out of the taxi and inquire myself. I got to my friend's place in the end. Generally I found Moscow male and female taxi-drivers cheerful and helpful, although they relied on their passengers to show the way. This woman's rudeness was exceptional.

About this time I started an abscess on my right thumb, and went regularly to the Polyclinic for thumb baths and penicillin injections. I had a blood test taken by a heavily-built woman who asked me if I came from Israel. When I said that I did not she lost interest entirely. A woman doctor sounded my back and chest and asked me if I would like her to photograph my lungs. She asked me if I coughed; I said no. If I smoked; I said yes. She said that an X-ray was not really necessary. Did I feel well? I told her that I was very tired and exhausted. She smiled encouragingly and said: "Never mind, I expect you have been working too hard. Try and eat plenty of butter and chocolate; your blood test shows that you suffer from anaemia. Do you like butter and chocolate?" I said that I did. I was dismissed.

A few days later I was told that I was to show my thumb to "the professor" and must be punctual for the appointment. The nurse who was putting on a dressing lowered her voice reverentially when referring to "the professor". He turned

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

out an awe-inspiring but not unfriendly personage. Finally I was given a prescription for pink and green pills by the Polyclinic and I was provided with yellow and brown ones by the American doctor attached to the US Embassy in Moscow. I took all the pills and added *foie gras* and beef (recommended by the American doctor) to the chocolate and butter diet recommended by the Polyclinic. It seemed a pleasant way of not being well.

Another depressing incident: at the beginning of December. Elena came to say good-bye to me. She was going to give up working for foreigners as she wanted "to return to her own people." She said she had grown tired of leading a double life, and after serious consideration had decided to get a job in a Soviet ministry and ruthlessly cut all her contacts with the foreigners she knew. "I shall be extremely sorry not to see you and all my other nice friends any more," she said, "but I am a loyal Soviet citizen and I think that it is about time that I worked for Russians again, even if I am not so well paid. Also it is embarrassing for my daughter to have to tell her friends that her mother works for 'imperialists'. It is not fair to the child, and we shall both be happier when I have a job which Masha can be proud of. I have greatly enjoyed these last few years and I shall remember all my friends with deep affection. Perhaps one day things will become easier. You understand that we in the Soviet Union do not want war and I know that your people do not want war either. People are the same everywhere; they would like to live at peace, but unfortunately some governments feel differently. We have a good government but not everyone is so lucky."

The Iron Curtain was coming down further, even inside the Soviet Union.

Yet not all Soviet citizens swallowed all they were told. A friend of mine went to see a new play about Moscow skyscrapers. The heroine was a good Communist, large, strong, sensible and hard working, who always came top in her exams and wearied her co-workers to death by constantly

setting new records and forcing them to keep up with her. The bad girl in the play wore fashionable clothes and did not work. After it was over, my friend overheard a Soviet youth remark: "What a disgusting careerist the heroine was. I much preferred the other girl."

Yet it was impossible to estimate how far such scepticism went. Recantations were the fashion again. *Pravda* carried reports of music critics, literary critics and economists who all confessed past errors.

One misguided economist (he was called Mendelssohn) was condemned for having written in an un-Marxist way about capitalist countries. His defence was that he honestly did not know what had come over him—he must have had some sort of a black-out . . .

Just before Christmas Serge received a message from his Head Office in Paris recalling him, for reasons of economy. We had been expecting something of the sort for some time. Serge would have liked to complete his three years in Moscow. I, on the contrary, was glad we were going home. I was pleased for a number of reasons. I was tired of feeling "run-down", which no amount of *foie gras*, beef, chocolate and butter seemed to cure. A healthy diet with plenty of fresh fruit and green vegetables was really what I needed, and the Russian climate made this impossible. I was sure that I would get better in Paris.

Then I did not like the Moscow winter with its endless months of greyness. Many of our foreign friends had already left and more would be going soon. Sonia and Elena had already gone out of my life. There were a few friends, married to Soviet girls, whom I would miss very much—both them and their wives—but I still wanted to go home.

I was longing to be back in a country where I could mix freely with the inhabitants; where I could choose my friends; and where everyone would not have to express the identical political ideology; where I could travel at will and without

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

asking for a special permit; where I would not be considered as a potential enemy alien . . . I had got tired of trying to visualise myself as an ordinary Soviet working woman, and imagining how much happier she must be under Stalin than her grandmother had been under the Tsars. I was tired of too much heavy, rich food. I had had enough of our segregated life, and I wanted to return to normality.

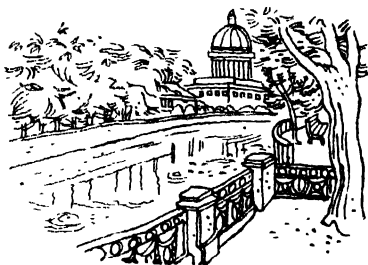
Yet I had enjoyed the major part of my stay in Moscow. I had made many excellent friends of all sorts of nationalities; I had never been to so many good parties in my life before (and I doubted if I ever would again!); I had adored the ballet, loved the opera, heard some extremely good concerts, been to all sorts of most enjoyable shows, to the wonderful puppet theatre, etc., etc. I had been marvellously entertained; I had travelled to several places outside Moscow . . . There was much to be thankful for, much to treasure, but not really much to regret.

We asked for our exit visas and tickets for January 9th and said that we would be spending three days in Leningrad before finally leaving the country. Meanwhile life went on as before. Serge needed a new bulb for the main light in his office. He was told that there was no large bulb available, but wouldn't a small one for the bedroom do instead? Then we had more Metropole egg trouble. When we asked for soft boiled eggs they were hard boiled and vice-versa. There were other things which went wrong, too, so for the last time Serge asked for the complaints book. Instead of the book, the kitchen manager and the chef appeared in person for a friendly chat about the monotony of the Metropole menu, the spit which only worked once a year, and so on. As a result we were served really tender lamb cutlets for dinner that night and the management sent us as a present a huge pot of flowers made out of vegetables! "A perfect example of monstrous misdirected ingenuity," remarked one of our friends, but I felt it was a kind thought, at least.

On December 23rd, Serge went to the airport to meet a

Chinese delegation, and announced on returning that one of its members, whom he had known in China, had actually greeted him in a friendly way! A most unusual proceeding when Communist met Non-Communist in Moscow. We celebrated the occasion by a good dinner at the "Aragoi". An unshaven Georgian with a very fine voice suddenly started to sing to everyone. When he reached the sentimental passages of his songs, he playfully caressed the face of the bulky, drunken Russian officer next to him: I liked the unexpected entertainment so much that before leaving, I went up to the Georgian and thanked him. He was so touched that he embraced me. Evidently the prospect of leaving Moscow was beginning to make me feel light-headed.

We celebrated Christmas in the approved British style with English friends. The Russians have their Orthodox Christmas at the end of the first week in January. However, as Soviet children are not taught about the religious significance of Christmas, and the State on the other hand evidently does not want to deprive them of the worldly aspects of the holiday, they have their Christmas trees on January 1st, which is a public holiday. Santa Claus is known as Uncle Frost, to distinguish him from Father Christmas, and is dressed in white. He smiles at one out of countless shop windows during the weeks preceding January 1st.



## Chapter 20

*Last days in Leningrad. The young woman who talked about Sartre and Picasso—who was she? My farewell to the USSR.*

WE took the night train to Leningrad on January 9th. Several of Serge's colleagues and their wives and some friends gave us our last dinner at the cafe of the National Hotel. To begin with, we were all silent and depressed, but things went much better once we had downed fantastic quantities of vodka. I did not intend to leave Moscow sober and after ten glasses of vodka, drunk to peace and friendship, followed by wine and champagne, I could not have cared less whether we caught our train to Leningrad or not! We were driven to the station by one of our hosts. He went through some red lights and did not obey the policeman's whistle to stop. At the next crossing he was signalled to stop again. He behaved as if he did not see or hear the signal. The third policeman drew his revolver. Our friend managed to slip into a side-street and we reached the station just in time. I recognised a few faces in the dim light and embraced all those whom I thought had come to see us off.

Leningrad was decked out in white to greet us. The Neva was covered with snow and crystals of hoar frost sparkled on all the trees. A pale sun was shining in a pale blue sky. The temperature was 22 degrees below zero (Reaumur) but one forgot how cold it was when one saw how incredibly well winter became Leningrad. I shall always remember how beautiful the city looked, and I now know why Russian *émigrés* say that no capital could match the loveliness of St. Petersburg.

For three days we said good-bye to all our favourite pictures

## PENELOPE IN MOSCOW

and buildings. Then, the night before we left, we made our last Soviet "contact" at the theatre. We saw a very excellent production of *A Comedy of Errors* which I had never seen in England. *Intourist* had got us very good seats in the stalls, and during the interval a tall, fair woman engaged Serge in conversation. Whether she, too, had been procured for us by *Intourist* or whether our meeting was a pure coincidence I shall never know. She spoke extremely good French and good English. We persuaded her to come and have supper with us afterwards.

We had an extremely pleasant evening. Tania (I never discovered what her real name was) designed dresses for the theatre. She told us that she had a flat in Leningrad which she preferred to hang on to rather than join her husband in Moscow where she would not be able to find a flat. She would not be able to find such a good job, either, in the overcrowded capital and in any case she loved Leningrad and would hate to live anywhere else. She wanted us to tell her about Jean-Paul Sartre and other contemporary French, English and American authors as she said that the literary movement in the West particularly interested her. She was exceedingly well read, and how she had managed to procure books by Evelyn Waugh(!) and other foreign novelists frowned on by the USSR I cannot imagine. She was interested in modern Western art as well as literature, and we talked about Picasso. His famous dove of peace was the only one of his pictures she had ever seen reproduced. We discussed books and art until the restaurant closed at 3 a.m. As we were leaving, Tania waved to a man on the dance floor who, she told us, was a well-known cinema actor. She did not introduce us. We were glad that we had met her and wished that we had got to know more Russians like her while in the Soviet Union. Were there many more like her? We could not know.

Our train for Helsinki left on Saturday, January 13th, at about 1 a.m. It was a Soviet train and the Soviet customs official who examined our luggage on the train at the frontier



## CHAPTER TWENTY

turned out to be a polite and pleasant woman. She naturally had to open each one of our myriad small and large cases, but she handled the contents with great care and told us that she loved France, because all Frenchmen were gentlemen. She never even referred to M. Thorez.

It was difficult to believe that we had really left the USSR as the train steamed on through the snow-clad Finnish forests. Before reaching the frontier we had already noticed a great change in the "dachas". They had become more modern, cleaner and much less picturesque, but the loudspeakers in the corridor gave us Russian tunes all the way to Helsinki.

When we stepped out of the train we were back in the West . . .

THE END